VISIT…

LANZAROTE
Caliente.com

DONDI WHITE

STYLE MASTER GENERAL

The Life of Graffiti Artist Dondi White

Andrew "ZEPHYR" Witten & Michael White

* "DONDI" *

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NACO ONE CIA
DONDI MOM 78
DONDI LUCY 79
PRE MAFIA NOC CIA
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DONDI T2B, WC, (C.O.+G. Part①)
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KID ROLL DURO *
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EDITOR'S NOTE

This book would not have been possible without the kindness and infinite patience of Peter Girardi, Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper, Carlo McCormick, and Chris Capuozzo.

Sincere thanks also to all of the writers who shared their recollections of late-night missions, basement strategy sessions, and general graffiti lore. Tomorrow's art historians owe all of you an enormous debt.

Extraspecial shout-outs to all of Mr. White's closest colleagues and partners, including the CIA crew—DURO, KEL, LOVIN 2 (AERON), KIST (RIP), KID 56, MARE, DR. PEPPER, CRASH, FUZZ, MED, DEAL, SPAR, TAKE, and Z-RO; the TOP crew—MICKEY (RIP), JAMES TOP (JEE 2), HURST (RIP), UPS 2, SID, FLIN, HULK, DIKE, MOVIN', HATE 168, STIM (RIP), TEE, SAIN, and HERB 99; and others including NOC, SLAVE, DAZE, FUTURA, DOC, LEE, Fab 5 Freddy, DOZE, Rammellzee, DREAM, KADO, RASTA, MR. JAY, KASE 2, GREG 167, SONIC, KANO, MAGOO 2, REPEL, 2 SWIFT, PART, SUN 2, and INK 76.

Finally, to any writer who is not acknowledged in these pages but should be—no disrespect. The inherent pitfalls of putting together any kind of definitive work on an artist whose medium is as fleeting as an NYC subway train were all in full effect throughout this process. The authors, the publisher, and the editor all acknowledge the very real contribution *of every* New York writer who picked up a spray can in order to leave a mark.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

In some cases, readers may notice that the year attributed to a piece may contradict the year painted on the subway car. The publisher has been assured that Dondi often dated his pieces a year ahead.

Further, please note that the KEL referred to throughout these pages is the one and only KEL FIRST.

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I NEVER WAS A GRAFFITI ~~ARTIST~~ 'WRITER' EVEN WHEN I WAS ACTIVE IN THE SUBWAY YARDS." I WAS A SUBWAY PAINTER, A SUBWAY WRITER" NOW THAT I DO WORK ON CANVAS. THE WORK CONSIST OF "HIGH TECH LETTERS WITH GHETTO BASSED IMAGES" (THEY ARE NOT GRAFFITI PAINTING

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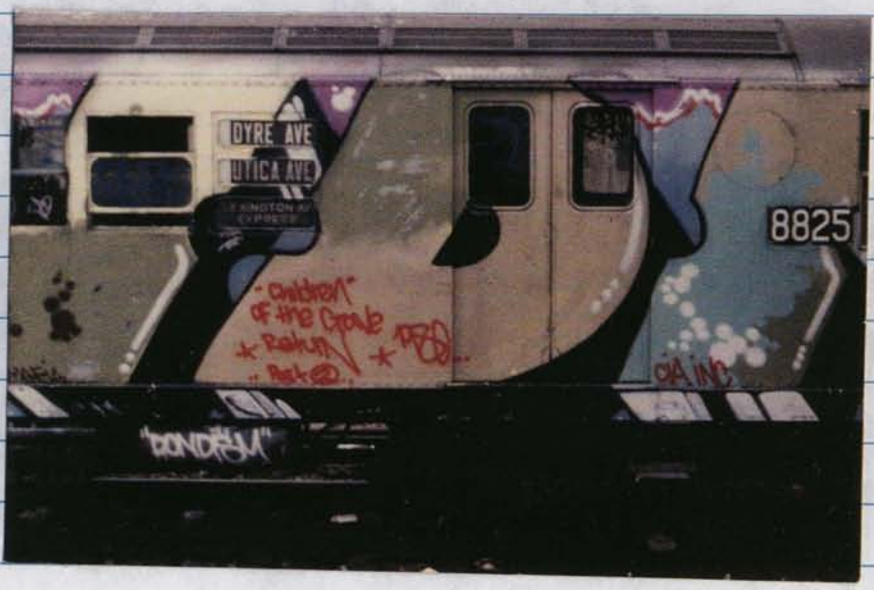
THE COMPOSER OF DONDISM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LEXINGTON AV EXPRESS
8825
"Children of the Grave" * Return * Part 2
"DONDISM"
CIA INC

FOREWORD

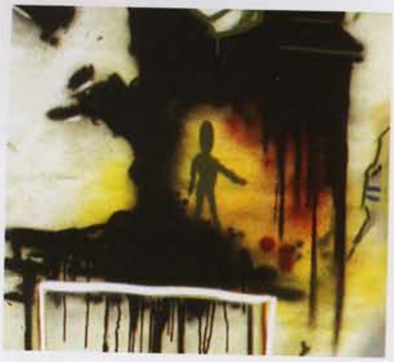
Graffiti A.D.

(After Dondi)

In the beginning, there was the Word. On the streets and in the yards, the word was the Name. And the name was everything. It was persona and place, form and content, truth and fiction. The name was an act of self-invention, a pure visual manifestation, through alter ego, alias, and nom-de-plume, of personal expressions in the public realm. The name was a line, and the line begat the Mark. Then, in the great style wars toward the end of the second millennium, medium, meaning, and message were joined in a golden era where the name became the source and signifier of Style. And when the name became wild style, the word was Dondi.

Dondi White was the undisputed Style Master General during graffiti's brief reign over the art world, mass media, and public consciousness. He was schooled in hand and eye by youthful exposure to graffiti's early-seventies incarnation as a currency of self-expression for urban youth. White's embrace of this criminal communication by the mid-seventies not only reflected the seismic changes then taking place in the socioeconomic topography of the city, it also forever changed this Brooklyn teenager into Dondi, the artist, and what had previously been viewed as senseless acts of vandalism into a fine art form. In a society that takes pleasure in blaming the messenger, it's easy to forget how, in the massive demographic shifts that were beginning to tear apart the social fabric of New York's neighborhood communities, graffiti probably saved Dondi White and countless others from the gangs and drugs. By the same token, it's just as difficult now to imagine the myriad factors and forces that would combine to transform an illicit schoolboy pastime into an international art movement.

Dondi helped establish the aesthetic criteria by which all such subsequent graphic gestures must inevitably be measured. He did this on the trains and, perhaps most daringly, on his own apartment building. Dondi



Detail from Anno Domini
1982

was among the first to make the move to canvas, to recontextualize his work in the galleries, to enter the rarefied and sanctified domain of museums, to help bring the Word across the globe, and to collaborate with the divergent agendas of advocacy and exploitation that would ultimately construct its representation in the media. To those who still disregard graffiti's cultural claims, as well as those who perceive this subculture's acquiescence to the institutional establishments of the art market and mass media as some unforgivable sellout, we contend that the accomplishments of Dondi, and those few others who rode that phenomenal wave of early-eighties popularity, constitute a radical intervention into the accepted terms of high and low culture that is, remarkably, without any equivalent.

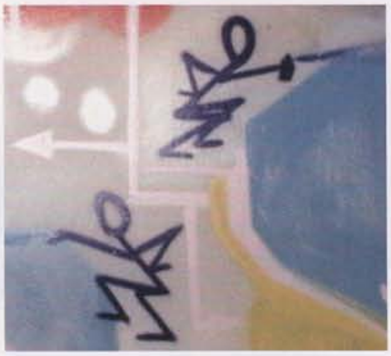
Graffiti After Dondi doesn't even have any common ground for a fair comparison. There's nothing worse than hearing old-school nostalgia, besides. But out of that unlikely polyglot mix of self-consciously hip downtown Manhattan club culture, outer-borough provincial disaffection and boredom, the still-burning embers of punk's self-immolation, and a new generation of art-school casualties were fostered the emergent inner-city genres: DJ turntablist scratching, MC proto-rap narrative, Zulu Nation politics, graffiti crew collectives, and rock-steady, double-dutch, break-dancing acrobatics. As much as the rapidly and constantly mutating form of rap continues to simultaneously absorb and discard hip-hop's musical roots, dance culture has evolved to where the electric boogaloo is a quaint passéism and V-Day in the anti-graffiti war is now such a distant memory that our pictures of the full subway-car masterworks of yore are beginning to feel like the tattered memorabilia of ancient soldiers from some long-vanquished army. In a postmodern ahistorical age where everything and anything is likely to enjoy its own periodic revival, perhaps the most viable record by which to understand that time and properly evaluate graffiti's artistic credentials in the end may be the paintings themselves.

Solipsistic and socially reticent to the point of being quite shy, Dondi conveyed the fundamental elements of style in his presence as much as through his art. In terms of personality and creativity, who he was, what he did, and the manner in which he conducted himself commanded respect and articulated an elegance that was emblematic. Dondi was the supreme draftsman, the connoisseur of craft, the master architect and deconstructionist of the alphabet's anatomy. With obsessive graphic formalism and an elaborate iconography that was at once profoundly personal yet ambitiously allegorical, Dondi just made it look so easy. While his public art gestures tamed and framed wild-style brute into a painterly poetics, it was the studio work—especially the more private journey of his voluminous "black book" sketches and drawings—where representation was steeped in hermetic contemplation. From his signature "stick men" to his similarly inscrutable silhouettes, the alienated anonymity of Dondi's city-sleeked everyman stood as haunted surrogate for a psychologically rich spectrum of disturbingly dark yet deeply humanist emotions.

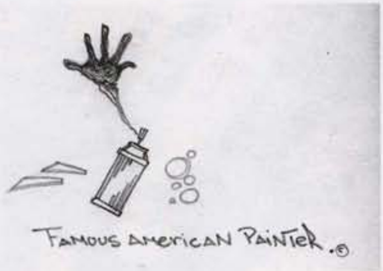
Aerosol aficionados praise Dondi's paintings, but to these eyes it was always the drawings that were paramount. Dondi White was a genius of understatement, and it is his less well known work on paper that reveals the discrete measures by which he distilled his systematically planned perfection into fluid streams of apparent spontaneity. Like the found blueprint renderings that became a major collage component in his later work, Dondi laid bare the fantastic architecture of process, methodology, and technique, charting a geometry of self with the streetwise mathematics of Cool.

Born exactly forty days after Dondi (and now looking at my fortieth birthday), that I am writing about him in the past tense is the kind of cruel absurdity that AIDS has all too often inflicted upon our generation. How, or why, Dondi came to leave graffiti with such melancholic and memorable meditations on mortality is beyond our knowing. Was he mourning his mother, his brother, those friends—all gone? Or perhaps that brief moment of graf's great glory days, also gone. The shadows, maybe cast by his own receding specter, and the skulls, dark continents of his gaping pictorial void. Dondi White died a legend. He got the fame, walked away to fight another day, and in spite of his success, proved proficiently and persistently poor at that game called capitalism. Graffiti lives on, and its perseverance will depend in part on the durability of its history. Rumors of its demise prove unfounded as this art form continues to mutate and manifest an ever-growing grasp on the popular imagination. Dondi's life and art are now the stuff of myth, retold in the oral histories of a subculture and circulated in the documentary traces of a rapidly receding past. The book you now hold in your hand, perhaps a soon-to-be-remaindered cult collectors' item, or maybe the first of many more, is a testament to all that. The leap from personal memory to public meaning is a whim of history only fools predict. But graffiti A.D., After Dondi, is a terminal point where the past is legend and history merely a dream of the future. Treasure these pictures, for it will be the art itself upon which rests the final measure of Dondi White's lasting legacy.

Carlo McCormick, 2001



Detail from Ancient Egypt
1981



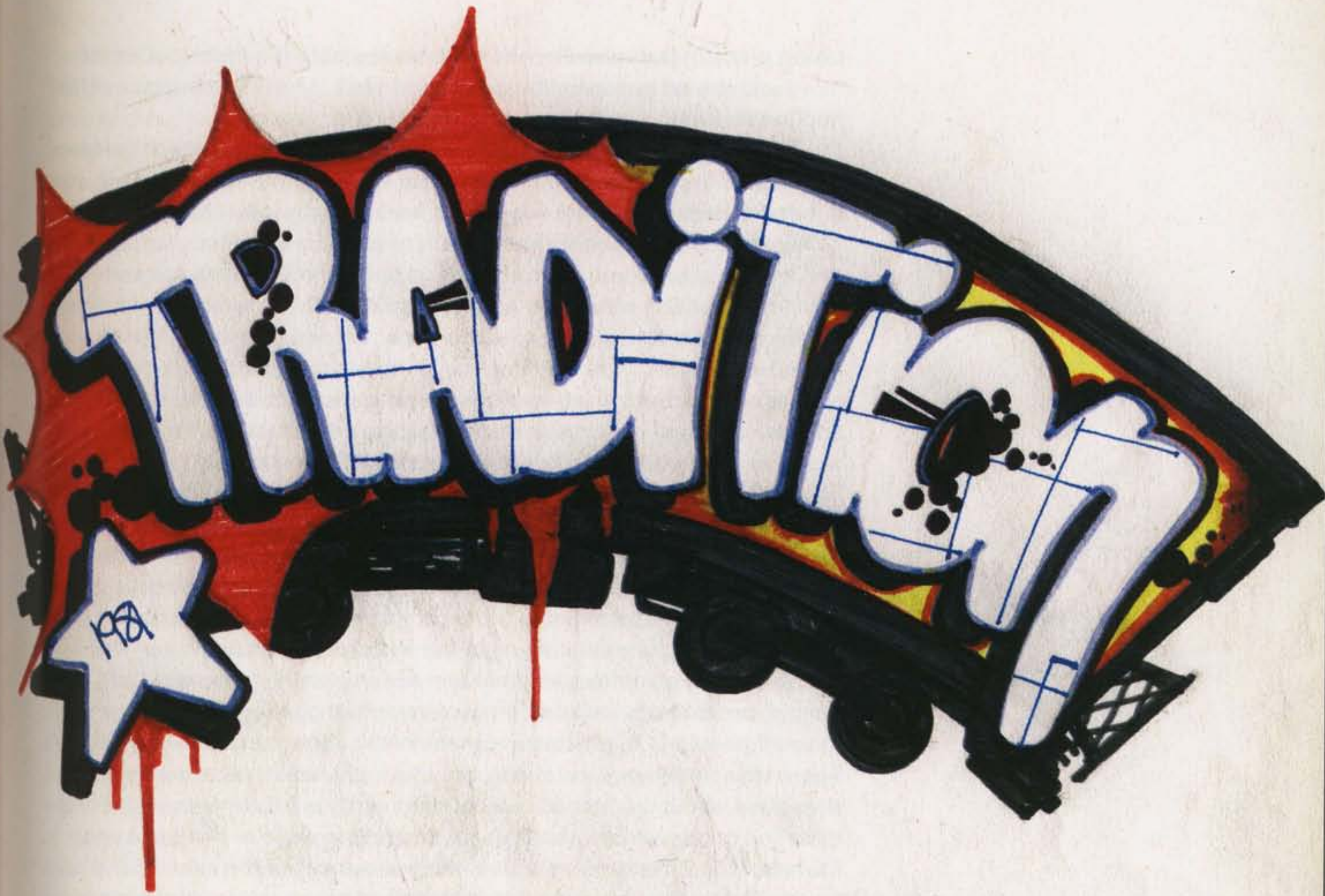
Famous American Painter
1986

INTRODUCTION

Dondi White was friends with the first writers I met: KEL, DAZE, MARE, SHY, MIN, CRASH, and COS. They brought him by my studio. It was Dondi who told me about Marty Cooper, and who brought her to my OK Harris show in September of 1980, a meeting that eventually lead to the publication of *Subway Art.* Dondi was a Brooklyn writer, a king in his East New York neighborhood who became a king of the whole city. He was down with the TOP and CIA crews and he allied himself with uptown and Bronx writers—the embodiment of the new tolerance on the street that superseded the old gang ethos so that people could leave their neighborhoods and "fly their colors" in an entirely new way without provoking attack. He made good friends among his new painting partners, although he always felt a residual mistrust of uptowners he didn't know so well.

Dondi's work had a big impact on the culture. One of the great experiences for the art aficionado in 1980 was a glimpse of *Children of the Grave, Part 2*; the audacity and stunning beauty of that great hand bestowing life and energy on the 3-D blockbuster top-to-bottom that rumbled around the city that year was dazzling.

If RIFF, CLIFF, STAY HIGH, PHASE II, CAY 161, TAKI, BLADE, TRACY 168, and SNAKE were among the Titans, Dondi was one of the Olympians, the next generation of writers who built on the foundation laid for them by the inventors of all the styles, the innovators of the medium. Dondi and his generation perfected the energetic, edgy, probing styles of their predecessors, learning control, fitting the painting to the car/canvas, paying attention to blocking and proportion, bringing the form to a state of high classicism. The older generation, in the 1973 Razor Gallery show, had paved the way to understanding graffiti as an art form that could find its place in art galleries. Dondi and his generation ran with this possibility, opening doors in both avant-garde and traditional galleries in the U.S. and Europe. They were also the ones who became associated with the exploding hip-hop phenomenon and so rode that wave around the world. Dondi and his generation of writers were marked by the big changes that were


TRADITION
1986

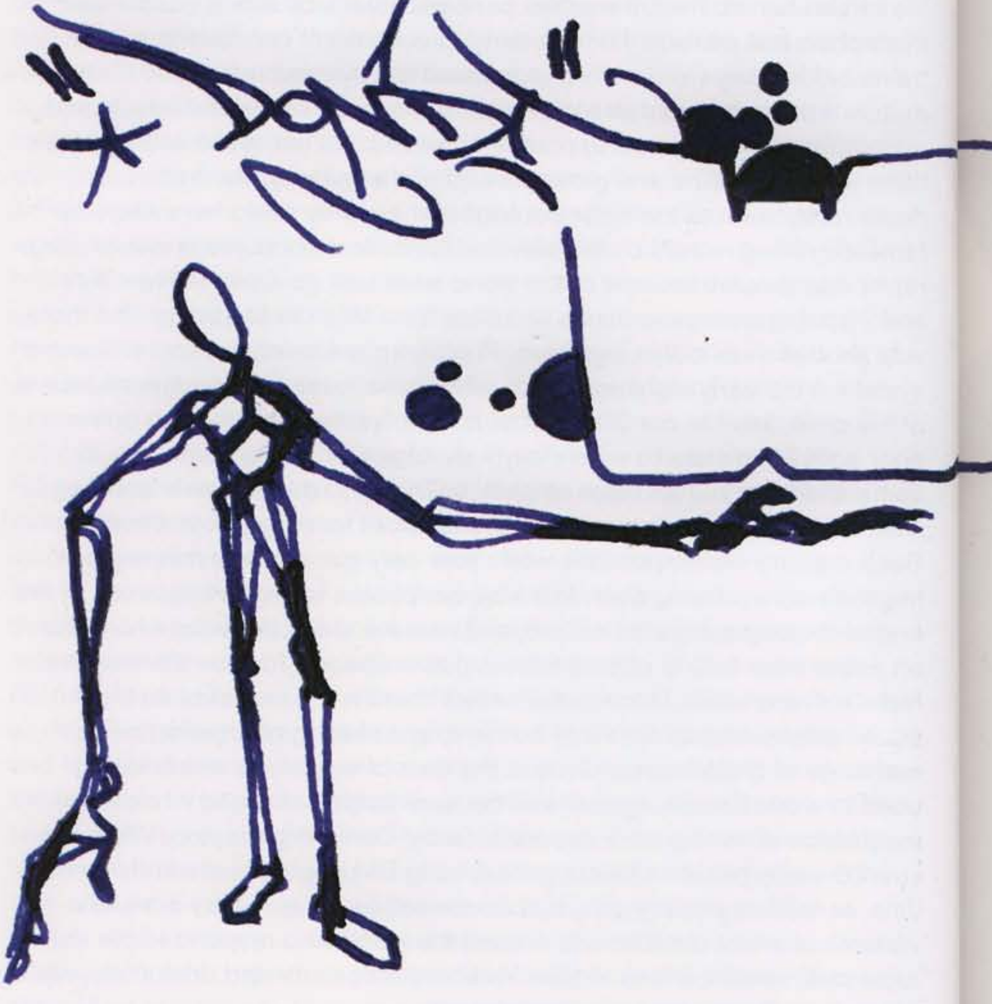
Tradition
1986
marker on paper
8.5"x 11"

taking place in the subculture at the time: the buff, the cross-out wars, the move into the art galleries, the books and films, and the emergence of hip-hop in the public awareness.

Dondi and his generation were fated to be the ones to catch the attention of the New York and international art worlds. This was an unusual confluence of events: the time when their work, which was at the height of its development, coincided with the death of modernism, which had refined and rendered itself into the formal dead ends of minimalism and conceptual art. There was a curiosity and fascination with art by artists who didn't come out of art school, and a sudden new interest in previously overlooked cultural forms nurtured in our diverse city. An early trickle of media attention and art-world interest quickly became a flood in the eighties, with articles, gallery shows, news stories, books, and films. The European art world, always ready to embrace the latest trends to come out of the U.S. (which they often think of, for better or for worse, as their future), saw in graffiti writing the newest and most authentic art form to emerge from the American popular vernacular in a long time. Many European collectors of pop art from the sixties resurfaced when they saw in aerosol art the successor to pop as the reigning American art style. There was a feeling that not only could you go to the jungles of Brazil or the mountains of New Guinea to find something original and in some ways more essentially human, but that new cultural forms were sprouting among previously ignored people in our increasingly monolithic technological societies. There was something profoundly hopeful in this to those of us who had despaired about the loss of cultural difference and the increasing homogenization of the world's societies. At the cutting edge of this spirit was Fashion Moda, Stefan Eins's South Bronx outpost of the international art world. This gallery introduced neighborhood street artists, photographers, and filmmakers to artists from downtown and Europe, creating an electric, exciting salon that profoundly influenced all who took part. Downtown, the scene was represented by Patti Astor, who hosted shows that brought together artists, b-boys, and MCs from uptown, the Bronx, and East New York with the East Village intelligentsia, club scene, and art and film worlds. At the other end of the spectrum was the venerable Sidney Janis Gallery, which brought the subway artists to Fifty-seventh Street. Showing aerosol art in such an elite venue was controversial, and the generation of pop artists who exhibited their work there complained bitterly, but the nonagenerian Sidney shrugged it all off, recalling that in the sixties, all his stable of abstract expressionists had walked when he began to show pop art.

Marty Cooper and I had a special window on the underground culture that grew up around writing. Our relationship with many writers evolved into friendship through our photography, and our exchange of pictures (sought by them) for information and inside access (needed by us to do our projects). It turned out that, as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle says, photography, as the eye of the observer, had a major impact on the life of aerosol art. First, it was the principal means by which people saw this ephemeral art form. For one thing, pieces never lasted long on the trains before they were buffed or crossed out by enemies. Jaded commuters who hadn't paid attention were often surprised by the beauty and accomplishment they saw in photos of pieces that had gone unnoticed by them in the mundane and gloomy world of the subway. Manhattan residents rarely went to the outer boroughs where they could have seen the fantastic rolling murals on the elevated lines. And of course, it was photography that showed the rest of the world what was going on in New York and inspiring new generations of artists from Milan to Melborne. But there was another side to this exposure. Photography altered the apprenticeship system in the early eighties. Dondi, who was a master to younger members of his crew, used to complain about it. He objected that I had an open-door policy in my studio where anybody, toys and masters alike, could come and hang out and look at photos. The toys used to come and they would spend hours copying the masters' work from my photo albums. Such copying was impossible when your only glimpse of a masterpiece might be on a passing train. In a way, our photos were the beginning of the end of the original graffiti culture, and now we are at the point where this art exists more fully in photos than in public spaces, for now the trains in New York are blank. Gone is the writers' bench, the center of so much social activity, critical review of burners, and sharing of artwork through exchange of black books. Gone is the aura of mystery in which writers used to work. Everything that was the core culture changed when the mechanics of writing were exposed. Sadly, Dondi is gone, too. What survive are many beautiful paintings that hang on people's walls and in museums, as well as photographs that document an extraordinary era and a vibrant culture of creative kids around the world who respond to the defiance and rebelliousness of New York's street culture and draw their inspiration from Dondi and his contemporaries.

Henry Chalfant, March 5, 2001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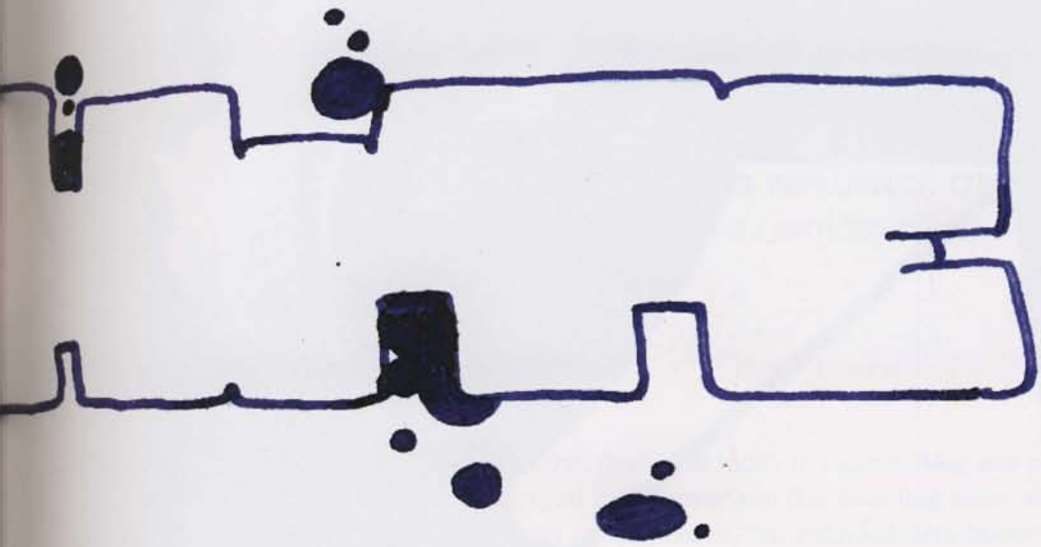


"I NEVER HAD TO COMPROMISE MYSELF. IT WAS ALWAYS ME, DOING WHAT WAS COMFORTABLE, AND RELAYING THE MESSAGE THAT I DIDN'T HAVE TO BE TAUGHT TO BE CREATIVE AND DO GOOD THINGS. I GUESS WHAT I'M SAYING IS THAT I'M HERE AND I WANT TO BE HEARD. I COME FROM THE STREETS, I PAINTED ON SUBWAYS, AND I FEEL MY WORK IS IMPORTANT. I WANT PEOPLE TO SEE IT—I WANT TO INFLUENCE OTHERS."

—DONDI WHITE

For some, graffiti all looks the same—like one person's doing all of it. But when you look closer you discover that every writer has his own style and his own unique vision. For each kid who becomes involved in writing, the time spent in the train yards is a unique learning experience. In the darkness of a subway tunnel, simple concepts like scale, composition, and execution take on different meanings and relevance. Everyone has a story he's trying to tell, and often the stories are very beautiful—if you take the time and listen to them.

Dondi White was an extraordinary storyteller. In his teens and early twenties he painted New York subways like no one else in history, crafting the cleanest, most dynamic aerosol art ever committed to Transit Authority steel. Then he barnstormed the international art world, creating a furor among European collectors who clamored for his work. By age twenty-four, Dondi White had achieved acceptance in the traditional art world like no other writer before him. Numerous European museums exhibited his paintings and retained them for their permanent collections, something almost unheard of for an artist whose mode of expression is, to this day, considered criminal. Dondi White trespassed into the establishment via speed and style and, like a true master of his craft, he made it look easy.

Dondi Catholic school photo
1966

Dondi first communion photo
1969

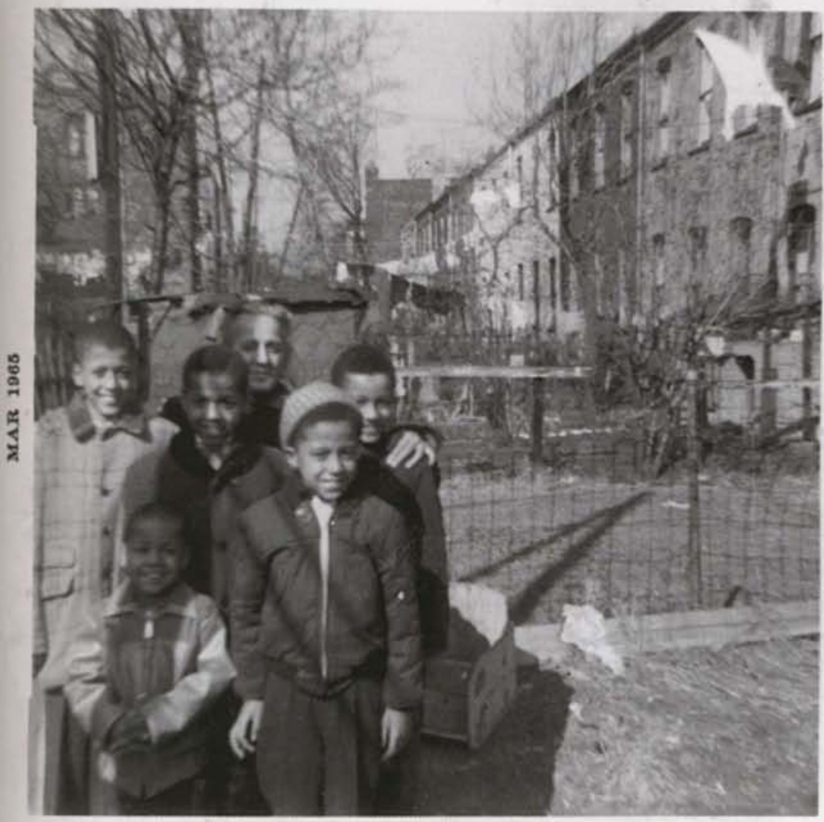
His adventure began at 5:25 A.M. on April 7, 1961, in New York City's Beth Israel Hospital. His Christian name was Donald Joseph White. Everyone (besides his mother) would come to call him Dondi.

Dondi's mother was Lucy Mary Espanet, one of twelve children born to Augustine Espanet, a stonecutter from Palermo, Italy, and his wife, Josephine, from Genoa. They arrived from Italy at the turn of the century. Mrs. White grew up on Water Street, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. As a young girl she worked as a seamstress and in her twenties became a registered nurse.

Dondi's father, Albert Alan White, Jr., was one of three sons born to Albert and Sarah White of South Carolina. The White family moved to Buffalo, New York, in the early 1900s. Albert White, Jr., moved to Harlem in the 1920s and attended Columbia University. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s he made his living on the railroads, working as a cook and porter on the New York, Chicago, Portland, and San Francisco lines.

In 1950, Mr. White was working as an orderly at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital when he met and fell in love with Lucy Espanet. The two were married in 1952 and their first son, Albert, was born later that year. In 1953 the family moved to Mount Holly, New Jersey, and Mr. White took a job on the assembly line at the General Motors plant in nearby Trenton. The Whites lived in Mount Holly for the next six years and Mrs. White gave birth to three more sons there: Robert, born in February 1954, Gilbert, born on Christmas day of the same year, and Michael, the couple's fourth son, born in December 1956.

In 1959, Mr. White left his job at General Motors and took a job in the city, working in the campaign office of Mayor Robert Wagner. It was at this point that the Whites traded the rural comfort of Burlington County for the clamor of Manhattan—settling into a small apartment at 252 West Seventy-



The five brothers and their mother
1965

sixth Street. After Dondi's birth in April 1961 the family, in need of room for their five sons to grow, moved to a house in Brooklyn.

BROOKLYN, 1961

East New York is the area of Brooklyn lying between Jamaica and New Lots Avenue, abutting Brownsville to the west and New Lots to the east. Modern development of the area began in 1835, one year after the future borough was incorporated as the City of Brooklyn. Following the first great wave of European migration, between 1840 and 1860, a large population of Italian, German, and Russian immigrants settled in the area. Many other Europeans moved from nearby Bushwick and Brownsville in search of less crowded living conditions.

The East New York of the early 1960s was a wonderful place to live—especially for a growing child. It was a safe environment for youngsters, with good schools and friendly neighbors. With its picturesque two-story houses and tree-lined streets (apple trees, no less), it wasn't stereotypical urban living. East New York in the 1960s was, even then, a throwback to simpler times—a real neighborhood.

Albert White, Sr. with Dondi (age 5)
1966

opposite:
Dondi drawing of Julius Irving (Dr. J)
1973

The Whites lived first at 412 Van Siclen Avenue, between Blake and Sutter, then moved over to 410, occupying the first floor and sharing the house with another family, the Fontleroys. With their arrival that spring, the Whites became the second African-American family on the block.

The four older boys played stickball and ringoleavio in the street until they got tired and retreated to the shade of the lilac bushes in the backyard. The boys were still young, and were restricted to playing on the block. Al, the oldest (he was nine), looked after his younger brothers.

Mrs. White kept her baby, Donald, in a big metal baby carriage in the front hall. She'd often sit on the front stoop for hours cradling him. By age three, Dondi was pedaling his tricycle in front of the house (the tricycle would reappear in his paintings two decades later).

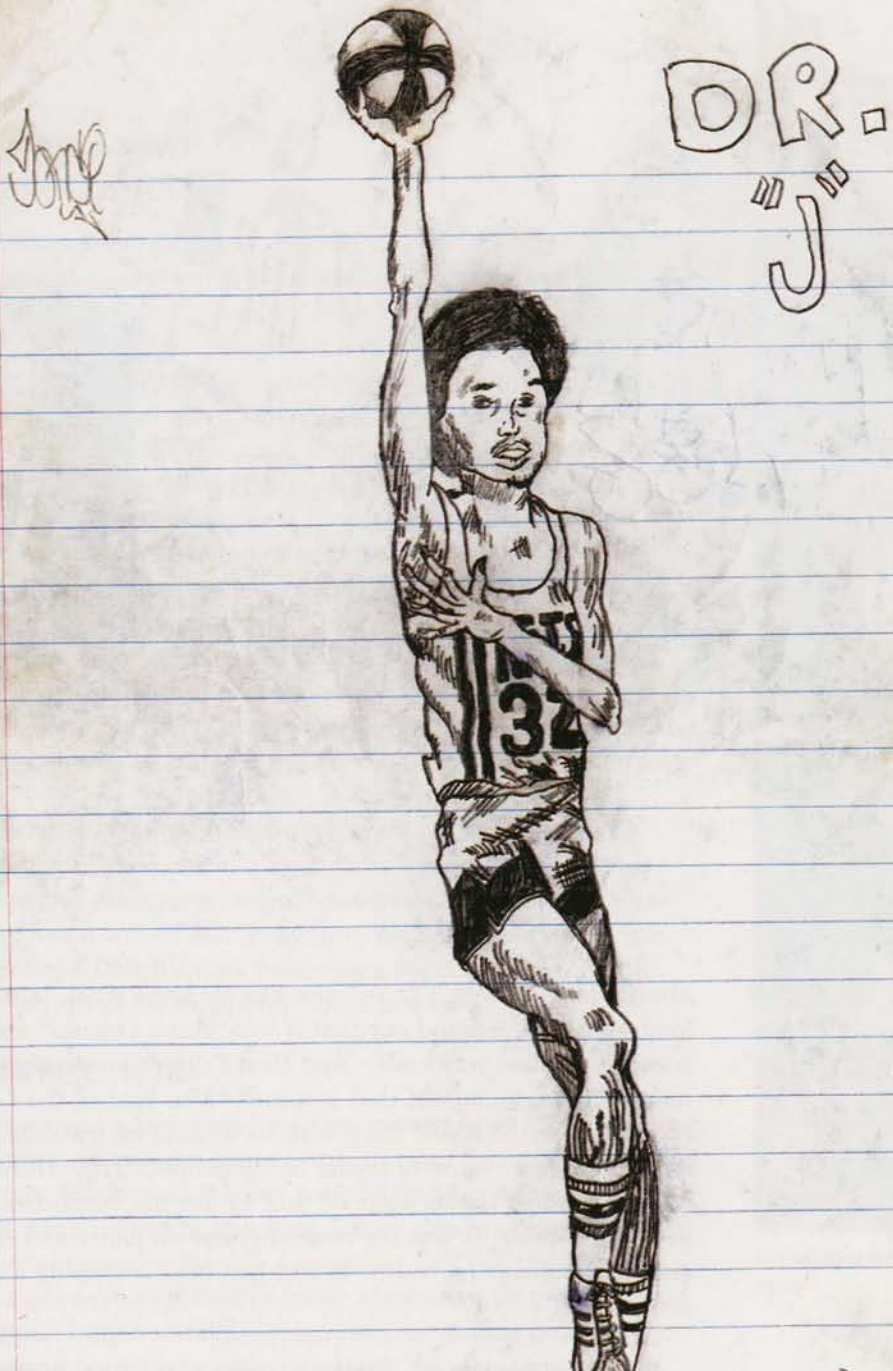
Before long, the boys' boundaries were extended, and they were playing touch football around the corner at Miller Field. They built go-carts out of milk crates and roller skates (making pint-sized Dondi the official test pilot) and sent them hurtling down Blake Avenue at unsafe speeds.

In the summer, the family made weekend trips to Coney Island. It was always a great time for the boys and a chance for Mr. and Mrs. White to swim. Soon the boys were making the trip alone.

The family attended mass at St. Michael's Church on Vermont Street, eight blocks from the house. While Robert, Gilbert, and Mike attended parochial school there, Mrs. White enrolled Dondi in St. John's Cantius, just five blocks from home. Mrs. White chose it over St. Michael's because she wanted her youngest son closer to home. Mr. White felt that Catholic school instilled the type of strong moral foundation he encouraged in all his sons. Dondi explained:

My dad wanted to put us all in Catholic school, He didn't like the way public schools were run. We had strong family morals. You didn't talk back to elders, you didn't curse, and you treated everyone like you wanted to be treated. You said your prayers at night, and you didn't fight amongst your brothers. If you had a beef with your brother that you couldn't settle, my dad would make us put on the boxing gloves, and take it out to the backyard.

Dondi spoke fondly of his years in Catholic school. His eight years there undoubtedly influenced him in many ways. Many of his personality traits, such as his attention to preparation and his sense of commitment, may be traceable to his Catholic school experience. Although the exact effects that Catholic school had on him cannot be measured, religious imagery from Catholic teachings were prevalent in his artwork later on, as were religious terms such as "Anno Domini." Dondi explained: I remember there were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NETS
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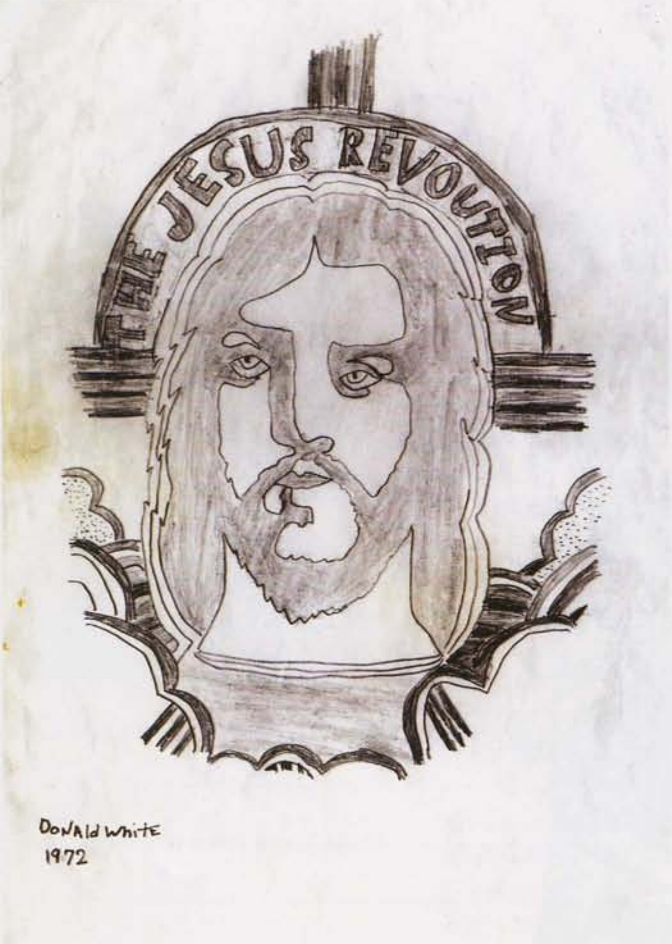
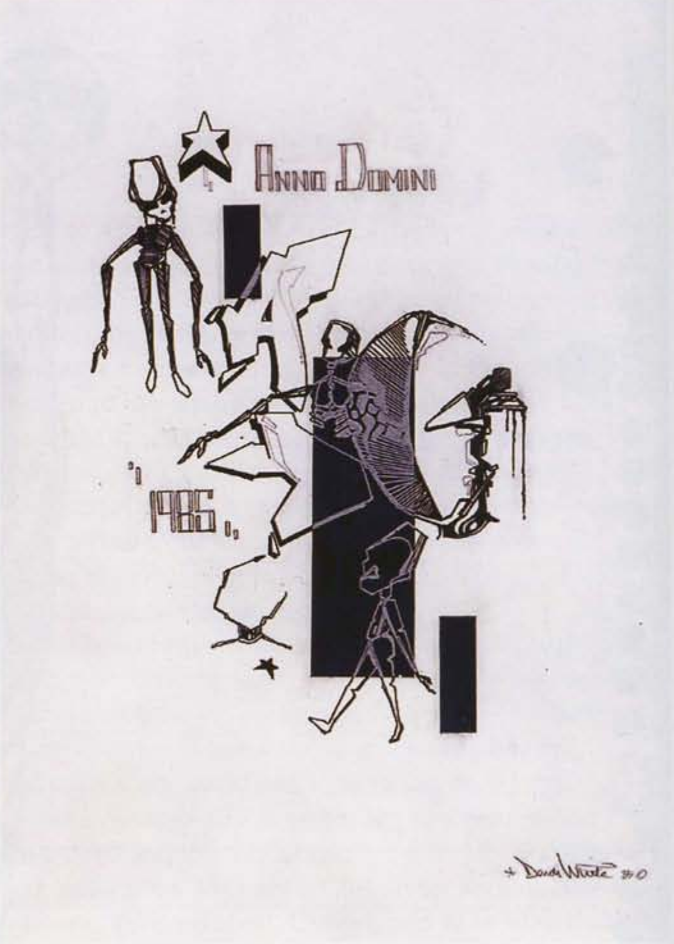




The Jesus Revolution
1972

Anno Domini
1985

always dates that had "A.D." and I never knew what "A.D." meant for so long. And then I found out that it was "Anno Domini" and I liked that because it rolled very easily. And then I didn't know what "Anno Domini" meant. And I found out that it meant "The Year of the Lord." That was cool, because the whole thing with us writing on trains was to tell about our upbringing. We were trying to tell people, "Hey! Here we are—this is who we are and this is what we do." So for me, Anno Domini, A.D., kind of helped me along. It was my new language on paper and canvas. I had another language on trains. It was just me, developing a new language for my art.

In 1970, the Whites left the house on Van Siclen and moved six blocks east, to a new home at 660 Belmont Avenue—just off Warwick Street. Dondi was nine and beginning to forge his own friendships. It was during this period that his brother, Mike, recalls first seeing the name "Dondi" written crudely along the base of streetlights near the house.

WARWICK STREET, 1970–1976

At the end of the 1960s, America was a bastion of anxiety. Racial tensions and an unpopular war abroad divided the nation. The country was in the midst of dramatic social transformation and New York City was on the brink of a devastating fiscal crisis. The ripple effect began to take its toll on East New York and the quiet enclave began to experience dramatic changes.

The two oldest boys, Albert and Robert, had both moved out, and Gilbert, sixteen, had one foot out the door. Dondi and Michael were separated by five years and Dondi had his own group of young friends. His five-speed Stingray bicycle was his ticket to freedom and he spent a lot of time at the Maxwell schoolyard, playing handball with the other boys. As cutbacks gouged the city's infrastructure, two unwanted guests came to settle in East New York—street gangs and heroin.

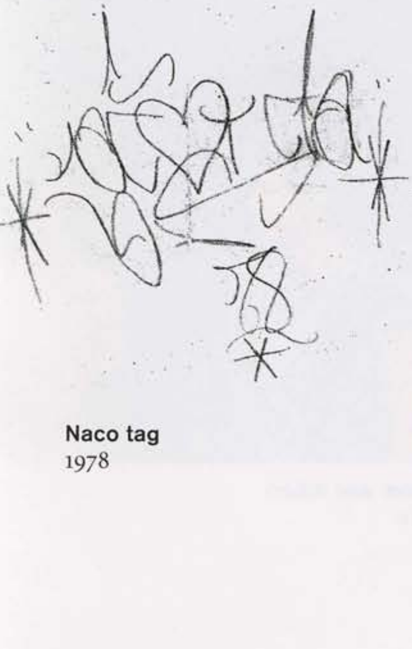
Dondi was still attending St. John's when his personal safety first became an issue. The possibility of his being recruited into a gang was becoming all too real and his family began worrying about him. Crews like the Crazy Homicides, the Headers, and the Tomahawks posed real threats to the community.

These were the realities of the new East New York. But still, Dondi played pool and built minibikes and did his best to steer clear of big trouble. One new interest he discovered might have been something of a saving grace, as it kept him involved and away from the craziness which was engulfing the community. Dondi's new hobby was flying pigeons, which kept him busy on the roof of his house for hours at a time.

BRADFORD STREET, 1976

In 1976 the Whites moved again. This time they moved eight blocks south to 574 Bradford Street, around the corner from the Van Siclen station on the No. 2 subway line. Dondi was the last son still living at home, and both Mr. and Mrs. White were retired by this time. Dondi was attending Tilden High but growing increasingly antsy. He earned his GED in 1980, and began working at a government office in lower Manhattan. At the house on Bradford Street, Dondi began to fully indulge his passion for graffiti. His room at the back of the house was often filled with his writer friends and the basement slowly morphed into his personal aerosol research lab—the strong odor of spray paint hung in the air.

Dondi and Albert
1976



Naco tag
1978

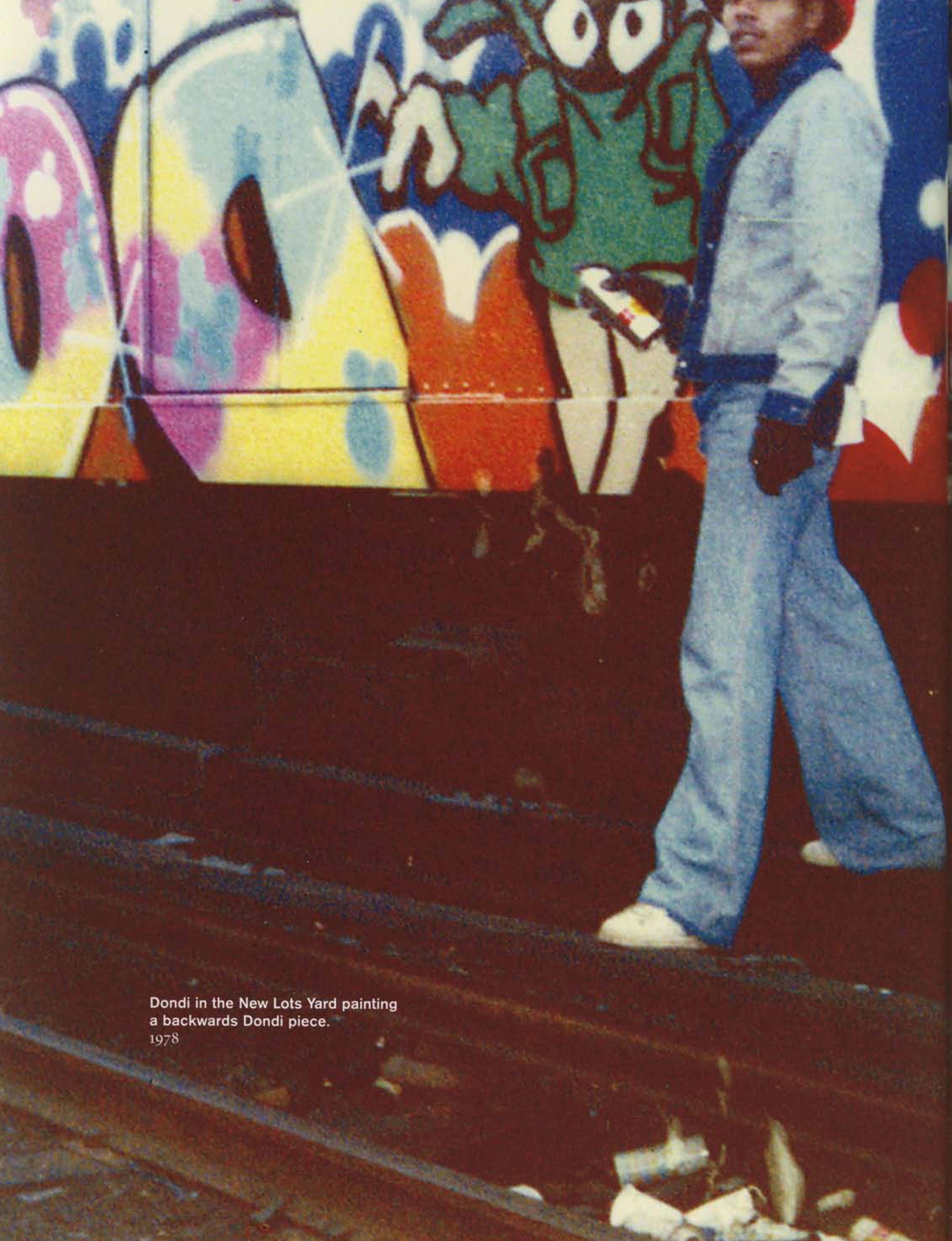
By 1976 Dondi had begun to carve out a decent writing reputation for himself. He was using the name "NACO" more often than "DONDI." His NACO tags were distinct and classy, with a heart-shaped "O" and stylized Roman numeral one. Dondi had not yet fully arrived, but he was an up-and-coming Brooklyn writer with a great tag, a lot of drive, and plenty of potential. Living in East New York was a graffiti writer's dream. Within walking distance of Dondi's doorstep were three major train yards—the New Lots Yard, which housed the No. 2 trains; the J-train yard; and the A-train yard. While some of Dondi's early writer friends stuck with street writing, his neighborhood friends DIKE and HULK loved hitting trains and Dondi went on some of his earliest train-painting missions with them. Like many writers, Dondi began as a "tagger." But he knew that to be taken seriously, he would have to do more. His early pieces on the M and J lines were simple and often done in block letters, but they were neat, colorful, and clean. By 1977 he was doing plenty of good-looking pieces—"NACO" and "DONDI" window-downs, "DL" and "NC" throw-ups, and huge blockbusters, often rendered backward for shock value.

GRAFFITI

The New York graffiti movement was born in the late 1960s. The first wave (1968 to 1970) was different from graffiti that predated it in that it was not political but a brash new form of self-expression. Pioneers like JULIO 204 and TAKI 183 are credited with setting the whole thing off. Both writers hailed from Washington Heights, a neighborhood at the northern tip of Manhattan. TAKI was inspired by JULIO's graffiti, but JULIO rarely wrote his name outside his neighborhood (JULIO is credited with being the first to affix his street number to his graffiti name). It was TAKI who took things to the next level. TAKI 183 began writing his name in black Magic Marker around his neighborhood during the summer of 1969. The next year he began working as a messenger and started writing it everywhere he went. Soon it seemed that his name was in every nook and cranny of the city. People wondered who (or what) the mysterious "TAKI 183" was, until the *New York Times* tracked him down for an interview in July 1971.

The article, titled "Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals," did just that. As the media took note of the new phenomenon, hordes of new graffiti writers joined the fray. By 1971 there were many hundreds—perhaps thousands—of kids doing it. Within months they discovered the perfect medium for their work: the exteriors of the city's six-thousand-plus fleet of subway trains (there was no better way to get your name around town). At first they "hit" the outsides of the trains as the trains pulled into the stations, but this

Naco backward "blockbuster"
1978



Dondi in the New Lots Yard painting a backwards Dondi piece.
1978

technique was awkward. Before long, trailblazers were taking to the electrified tracks at night and spraying their names on parked trains. Once the writers saw their handiwork "running," they were hooked, and hordes of new recruits took to the tracks and began to create increasingly ambitious "pieces" (shortened from "masterpieces"). Soon the train yards were being accessed as well, generally at night, but sometimes even during daylight hours. Before long, virtually every car in the system was sporting some level of unauthorized decoration.

And so a grand tradition was born. A number of writers with enormous conceptual and executorial skill, or "style masters," emerged. Masterpieces created under variously dangerous and impractical conditions began to appear more regularly. The years between 1972 and 1975 were "golden years," during which countless stylistic innovations were made. Graffiti careers usually averaged only two or three years, and most writers were male and between the ages of fourteen and sixteen years old.

Early train painters did not generally consider themselves artists, simply "writers." Their early work was pure and free-spirited. The act of writing was a unique hybrid of art and sport, spiked with adrenaline and an intoxicating element of danger. The writing movement was the collective voice of the inner city's youth, overlooked, disenfranchised, and forgotten, speaking up with spray cans and markers. Graffiti became the first art movement in the history of the world created by kids, for kids.

By 1972 the brass at City Hall and local citizens were outraged, but they were too late. Graffiti fever had taken over.

Graffiti crews became increasingly popular, organizing along the same lines as street gangs, but existing primarily for the purpose of writing. There were Brooklyn-based crews like the Ex Vandals and Bronx crews like OUT TO BOMB. Memberships crossed borough lines, but everyone knew where the important crews originated. Different parts of the city developed different styles of writing and to the knowledgeable eye, "Brooklyn style" was clearly distinguishable from "Bronx style." The movement utilized the apprenticeship system as a method of self-perpetuation. Older, more experienced writers handed down the secrets of the game to younger writers coming up in the ranks.

Some writers achieved local celebrity status for their writing accomplishments—proudly representing their respective boroughs as they claimed the title "king of streets," "king of trains," or "king of style."

Through raising pigeons, Dondi made friends with those whom he later went on to do graffiti. Most notable was a writer named SONO who Dondi met in late 1974. SONO later changed his graffiti name to DURO.

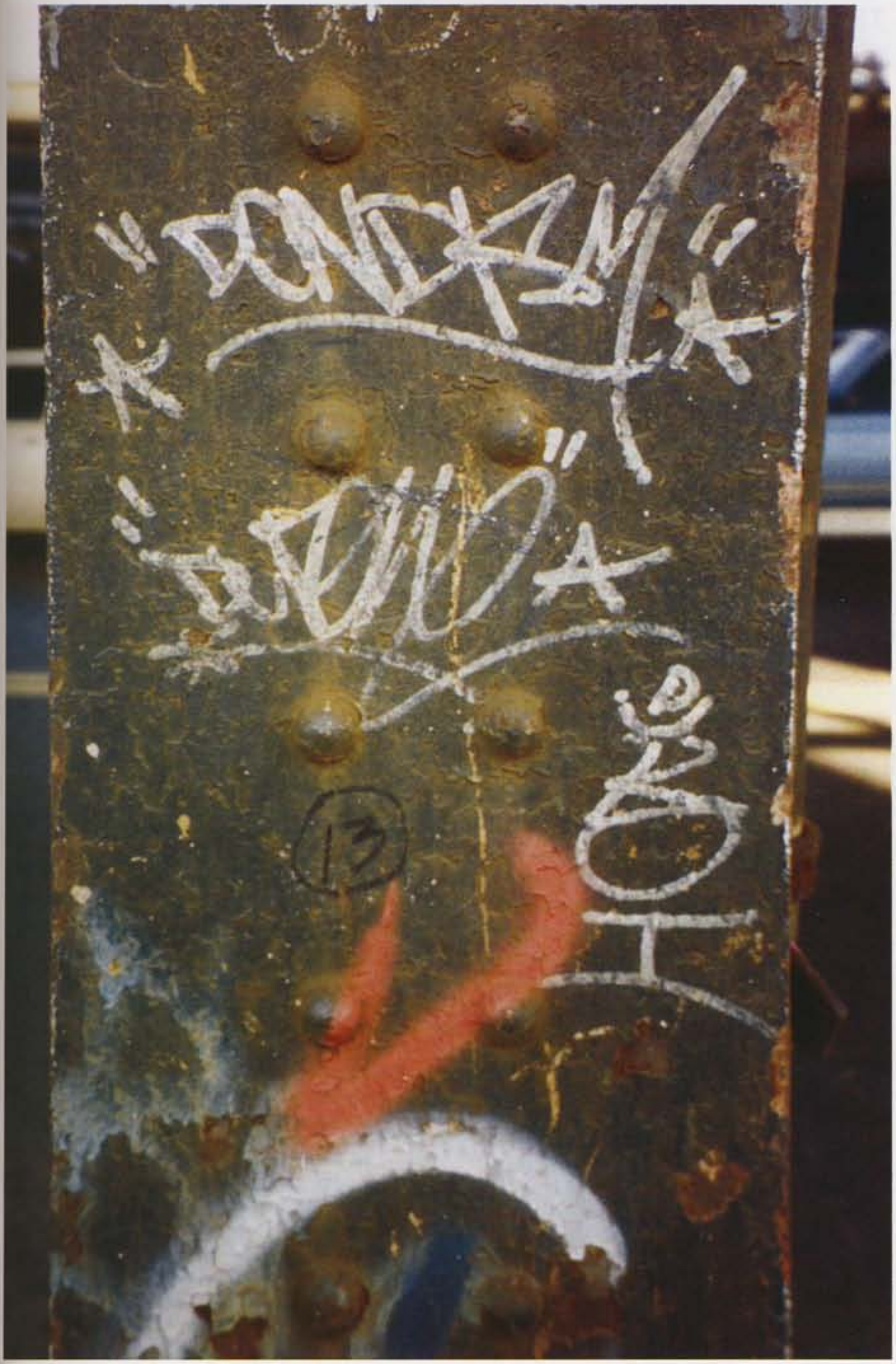
DURO became Dondi's best friend and writing partner for many years. Dondi met a number of other writers during his "pigeon days," such as DURO's cousin, FLIN, and two brothers, DIKE and SID, and their cousin IK, also known as HULK.

In East New York, street gangs divvied up the territory, marking their turf with graffiti. The gang writing, which evolved independently of the subway writing movement, was among Dondi's early memories of seeing graffiti.

"I got into [graffiti] on my own because as I'd go to different neighborhoods I was always looking on the walls to see what gang was in the neighborhood. That might have been a start. I also remember riding the A train and seeing graffiti. It's kind of hard to pinpoint the start. I mean, if I had a spray can I'd use it, but I wasn't into racking up or anything."

Early on, Dondi's approach to writing was very casual. He wasn't "into racking up," or stealing spray paint. Traditionally, as a rite of passage as well as a necessity, graffiti writers "invent," or steal, their supplies. Aside from the fact that many writers lacked the means to buy spray paint, a 1972 ordinance banned its sale to minors.

Although Dondi claimed to have gotten into graffiti mainly on his own, the writers from his area, DURO a.k.a. SONO, FLIN, IK, SID, and DIKE helped develop his interest. The family dynamic remained a constant throughout Dondi's life. His graffiti cohorts quickly became his extended family. Throughout his life Dondi continuously developed new families, and they all reflected his commitment to allegiance and unity.



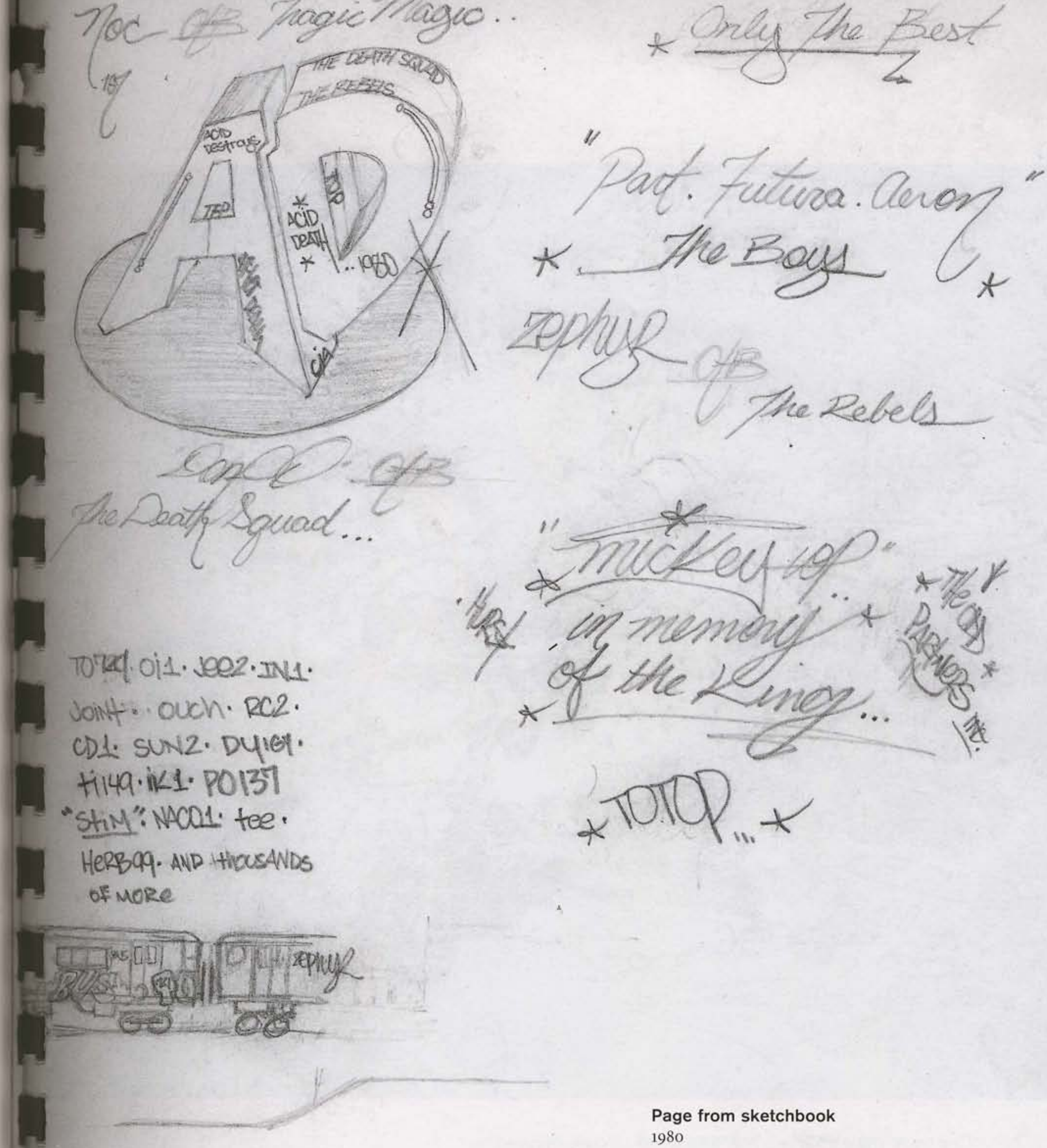
Dondi & DURO tags

THE ODD PARTNERS, 1977

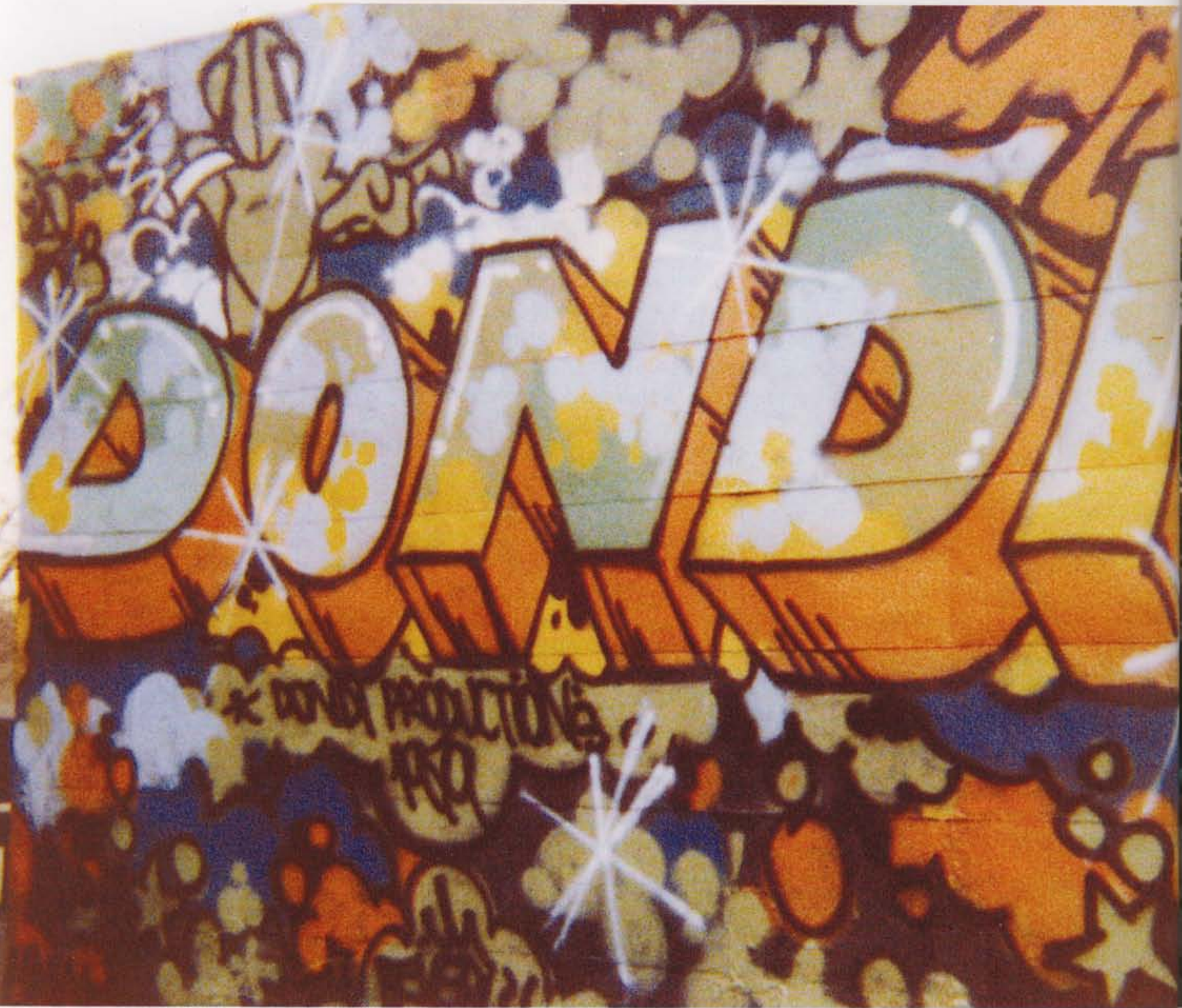
By 1976, a graffiti crew from Brooklyn emerged as a powerful force on the trains. The crew, known as TOP (often pronounced "top"), was founded by a writer named MICKEY (RIP), who also used the name TO 729. TOP, an abbreviation for "The Odd Partners," dominated the BMT (Brooklyn Manhattan Transit) and IND (Independent Subway System) train lines during this period, with the majority of their work appearing on the A, M, J, and LL lines. One of the tools the crew employed was the extensive use of throw-ups. Among TOP's ranks were some of the most prolific throw-up artists ever, most notably IN. TOP, however, did not restrict themselves to just throw-ups. They were fully committed to hitting train interiors with their tags as well as executing hundreds (if not thousands) of whole-cars, blockbusters, and burners.

In the summer of 1977, Dondi met a writer from the neighborhood, a few years his senior, named James. James wrote as JEE 2 and was a well-known writer and founding member of TOP. James saw something special in Dondi and believed he would be a positive addition to the exclusive crew. In 1977 Dondi officially became a member of TOP.

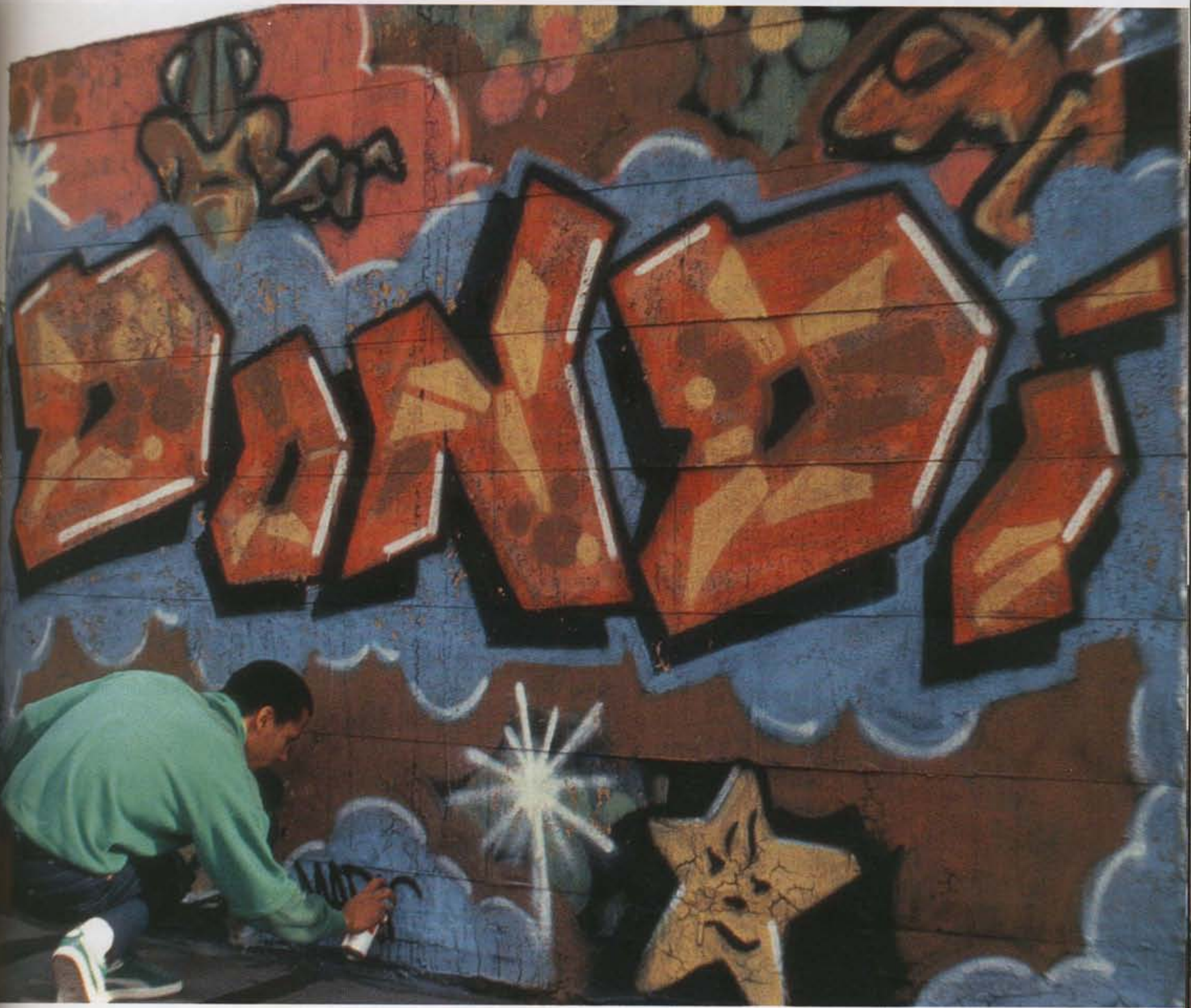
Dondi learned a great deal from the more experienced writers in TOP. Throughout his later years he often acknowledged HURST (RIP), MICKEY (RIP), and other members of the crew for their powerful influence.


Noc ~~of~~ Magic Magic..
* Only The Best
THE DEATH SQUAD
THE REBELS
ACID Destroys
ACID DEATH
TOP
1980
"Part. Futura. Aeron"
* The Boys *
Zephyr of The Rebels
of The Death Squad...
"Mickey of" in memory of the King...
The Old Partners Inc.
TOTOP...
TOP149. Oi1. Jee2. IN1.
Joint.. ouch. RC2.
CD1. SUN2. DY161.
Ti149. iK1. PO137
"StiM". NACO1. tee.
HERB99. AND thousands
OF MORE
Zephyr

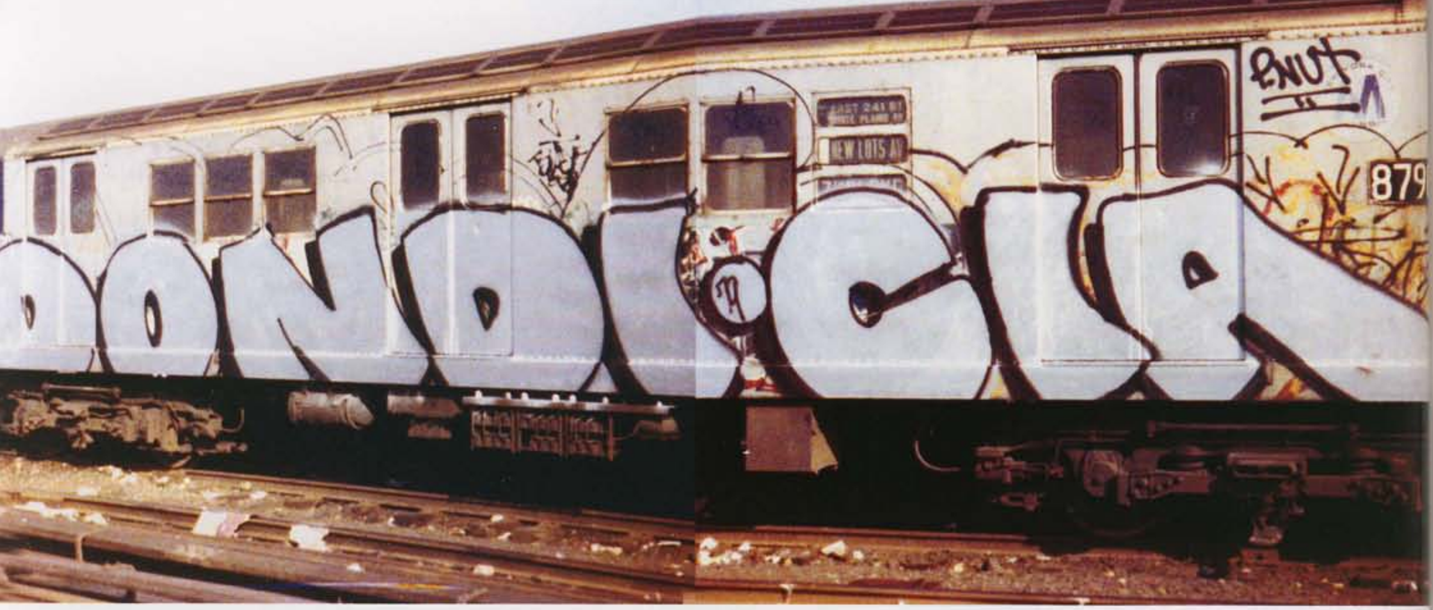
Page from sketchbook
1980



One could argue that the graffiti artist Dondi officially declared his arrival when he painted a huge "Dondi" piece on the roof of his house on Bradford Street. The piece was fully visible from the passing No. 2 train. While most writers maintained double identities, doing everything to keep their writing a secret, Dondi boldly announced himself. With angry straphangers and graffiti detectives on the prowl, the rooftop piece was a surprisingly incongruous and bold move.



Two versions of the rooftop piece
1979 & 1983
photo © Martha Cooper



Dondi CIA
1979

CRAZY INSIDES ARTISTS, 1978

The importance of TOP in Dondi's development as a writer cannot be overstated. His acceptance in this well-respected crew was the cornerstone of his graffiti career. In early 1978, with many of TOP's members retiring from writing, Dondi created his own crew, which he named CIA. He chose the abbreviation for its obvious clandestine implications, but also to describe his penchant for hitting "insides." CIA was originally formed as "Crazy Insides Artists."

Dondi was a natural teacher, constantly sharing his expertise with those around him. Under his tutelage many writers graduated from "wanna-bes" to kings, though Dondi rarely took credit for his contributions. (Years later, in the spotlight of commercial success, Dondi remained humble and rather shy. It's sad to note that some of his contemporaries misinterpreted his shyness as aloofness, and found him difficult to approach.)

Dondi's graffiti art continued to improve as he spent countless hours drawing detailed "outlines"—plans for future subway pieces. He continued to meet other artists who influenced his passion for lettering styles. For Dondi, mastery of lettering was not only an art form but a science as well. Mastering the Roman alphabet—or more accurately, reinventing it—became his primary preoccupation. He painstakingly dissected the letter forms and manipulated them. He spent thousands of hours drawing in his "black books" and loose-leaf binders.

Dondi was a perfectionist and carefully planned everything he did. His work process was very personal and private, in sharp contrast to the public nature of his final products. He took a monastic approach to his work, locking himself in his room for days to work out the details of new ideas.

But there were some peers with whom he shared those ideas. Of special note is the legendary Bronx-based style-master NOC 167. Their long friendship was special for both of them, as they fed off each other's concepts, explored the parameters of style, and pushed each other to new creative heights. Another writer whose work Dondi had enormous respect for was SLAVE. SLAVE was an older neighborhood friend of Dondi's, a revered style master and member of the legendary writing clique the Fabulous Five.

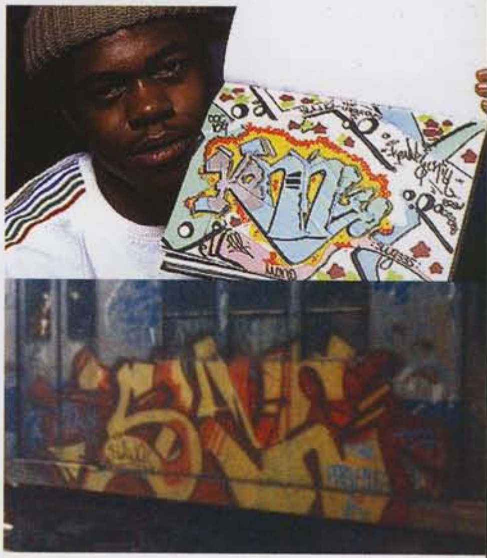
By late 1978, Dondi was painting perhaps the most inventive and creative wild-style pieces of anyone, anywhere. However, he was doing the majority of his work on the BMT lines, which did not travel to the Bronx. The Bronx was considered by many to be ground zero for the culture. In 1978, many writers were still unaware of his work. As he began painting more on the IRTs (Interborough Rapid Transit trains)—probably partially motivated by the fact that they passed his house—Dondi's work blew away the Manhattan- and Bronx-based writers who were seeing it for the first time. Even the most jaded—who thought they'd seen the best—had to admit that this "new" guy was something else.

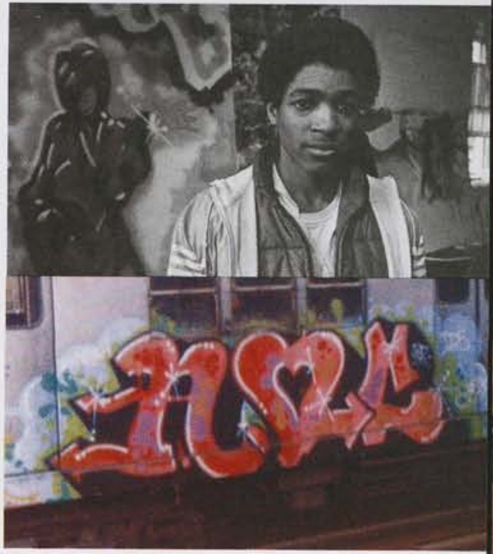
Dondi continued to push the envelope, as he never seemed content with his accomplishments. As soon as he'd pull off the best whole-car on the line, he began planning something to top it. No one can say what exact ingredients combined to make Dondi so good, but his exhaustive planning and preparation certainly helped.

Dondi was methodical in every aspect of his life. When the CIA boys were at work in the train yards, everyone was delegated a responsibility. While Dondi was filling in on one end of the car, DURO was working on the background. Dondi conducted the orchestra and outlined most of the work. Within the workings of CIA, every detail was attended to. ERIC 700 (also known as DEAL) was even appointed CIA photographer. It was his job to go out the next day and photograph the finished trains.

Dondi continued ratcheting things up, creating better work and broadening his perspective through partnerships with different writers. KID 56, the younger brother of old-school graffiti pioneer FDT 56, and KEL 139, from the Bronx, became partners of his, as did Bronx legend FUZZ ONE.

CIA began to dominate the IRT No. 2 and No. 5 lines in 1979. The CIA family was an extended family now, but the principal players remained Dondi's homeboys from his area—DURO, LOVIN 2 (also known as AERON), and KIST (RIP).


Slave
photo of Slave: Martha Cooper


Noc 167
photo of Noc: Rafael Pesquera

Clearly, graffiti was the practice through which Dondi White discovered art: The yards were his classrooms, and black books his reference material. Throughout '77 and '78 Dondi's pieces (primarily painted on the BMT train lines) were executed in a style in which letters were fused to each other through a unified base. The approach was restrictive, and he abandoned it in late '78, and his new pieces set new standards for wild-style graffiti.

Designing inventive outlines was only half of the process—the real test came in the confines of the train yards, where ideas had to be executed under tense conditions. Always the perfectionist, a demanding checklist of elements needed to come together in order for him to be satisfied with his work. His style contrasted hard clean lines with soft flowing ones, but his approach was practical, and he never ventured into the abstract territory occupied by writers like Futura or A ONE. Dondi adopted an original approach to the design and placement of his graffiti on the trains. As his outlines became increasingly radical, he stopped confining his pieces to the cars' panels. His names started and ended on the doors, and connections and appendages flew up and over the windows. Sometimes he'd begin a piece on the edge of a car, covering the doors, even when the panels were available.

In the early seventies, the practice of "burning" with different names was popularized by a writer named RIFF 170. Subsequent style masters like Dondi used this approach to further their experimentation with the alphabet and explore different possibilities. Dondi constantly threw new monikers into circulation, most of which were selected for their graphic potential over their meaning. One of the names Dondi used on the trains was "White." The use of his family name was a bold but calculated risk. Dondi only executed his "White" and "Mr. White" pieces with "style," and fortunately the results were difficult for "non-writers" to read.

Dondi's collaborations with other writers were an important part of his artistic life. For a man as private as Dondi White was, it's almost contradictory that he amassed such a long and varied list of writing partners. They range from the obscure to the legendary, and hail from every corner of the city. Passionately proud of his Brooklyn heritage, Dondi had a special affection for other writers from the borough. He saw his graffiti as a proud offering from East New York, but welcomed competition from writers based in other parts of the city.

Rivalries with writers from other boroughs were part of the game, and wars were waged, won, and lost on the sides of New York's subway cars. Just how real the Brooklyn vs. Bronx rivalry was is a matter of opinion. But to Dondi, it was serious business. Always the diplomat, his passion for representing his home turf never prevented partnerships with Bronx writers.

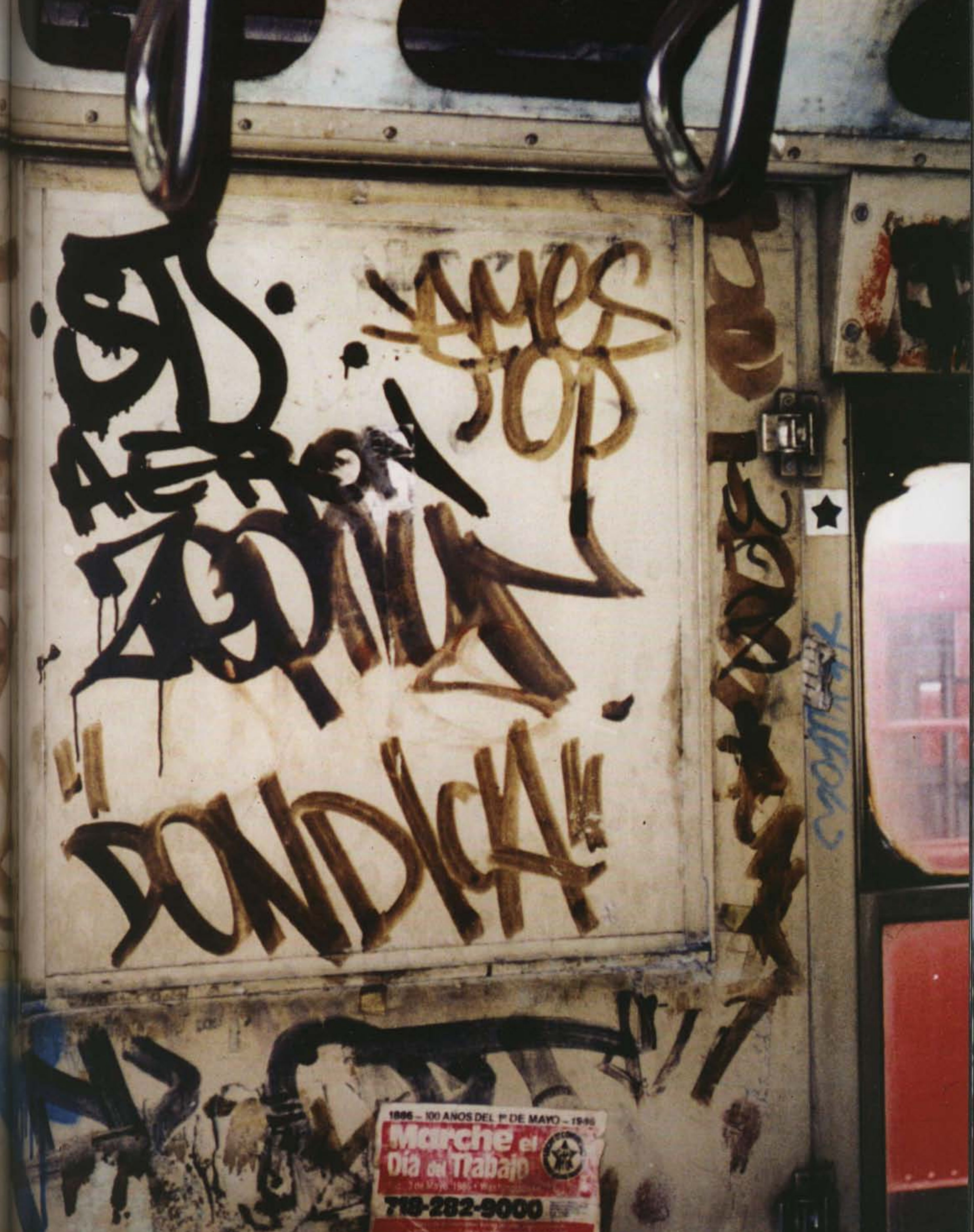
Tens of thousands of young people participated in graffiti writing during the course of New York's transit painting period (1970–1989). While there is some consensus regarding specific achievements, Dondi's role in this complex culture cannot be quantified, although he was clearly one of the most influential writers of all time. Socially unacceptable in its time, it is important to note that not one painted image contained within this chapter still exists. All of Dondi White's subway art has long since been scraped off, painted over, or chemically removed. Through these images, however, it still speaks volumes.

underground

Brake Valve
Freno de Emergencia Válvula
2
DONDI

DONDI

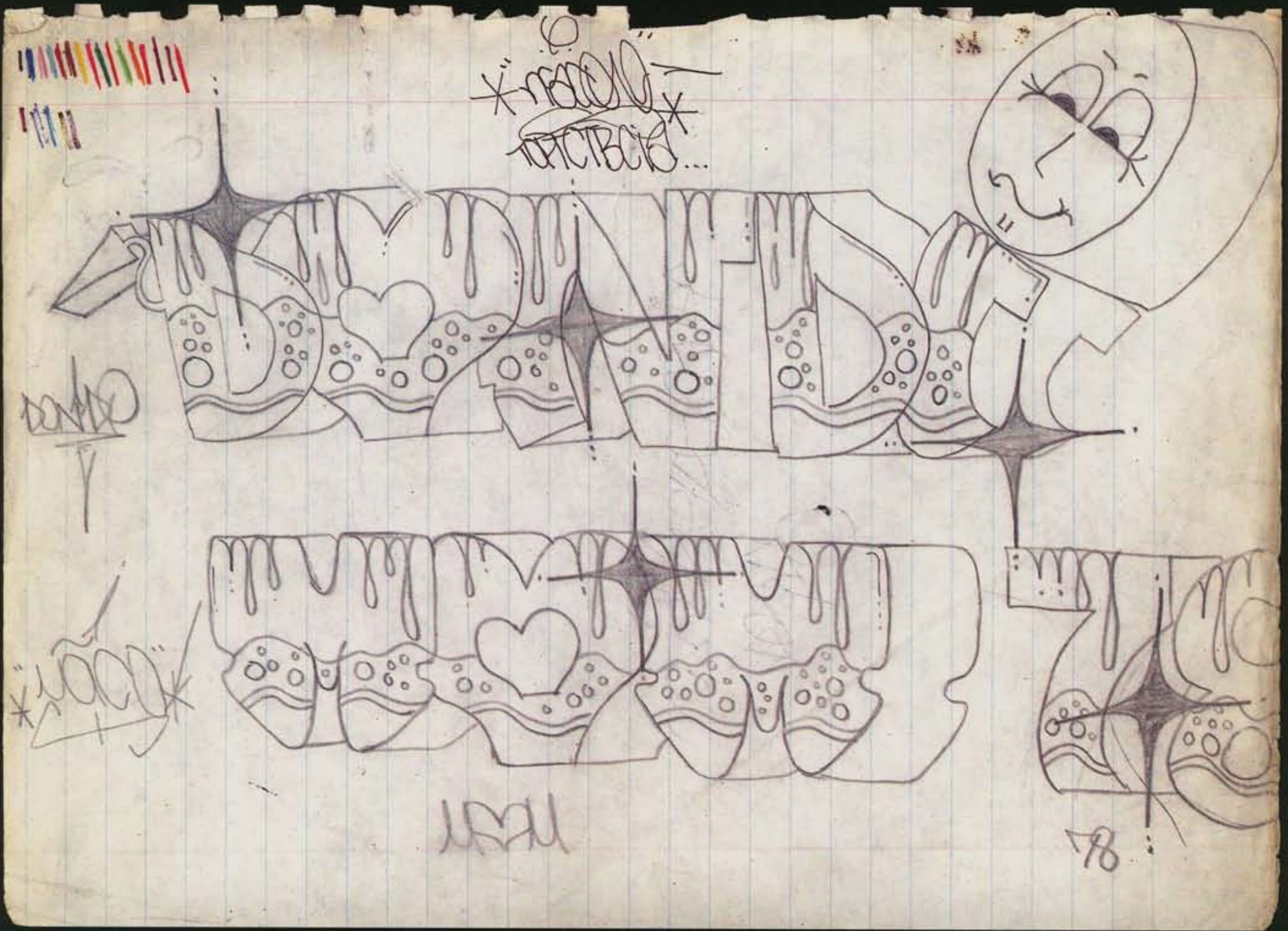
DONDI
15

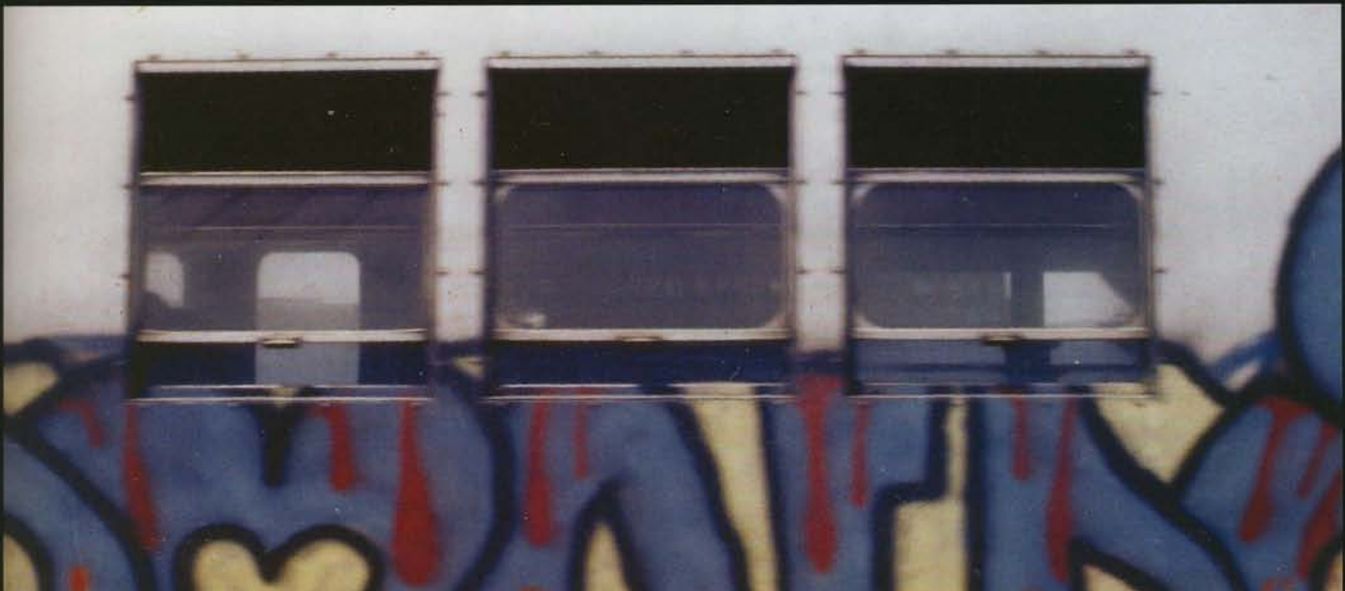

1886 – 100 AÑOS DEL 1º DE MAYO – 1986
Marche el Día del Trabajo
718-282-9000

Dondi 1977

photo: © Jack Stewart

This is one of the earliest known Dondi pieces with an existing outline. It was done in 1977 and post-dated by Dondi with the year "78."

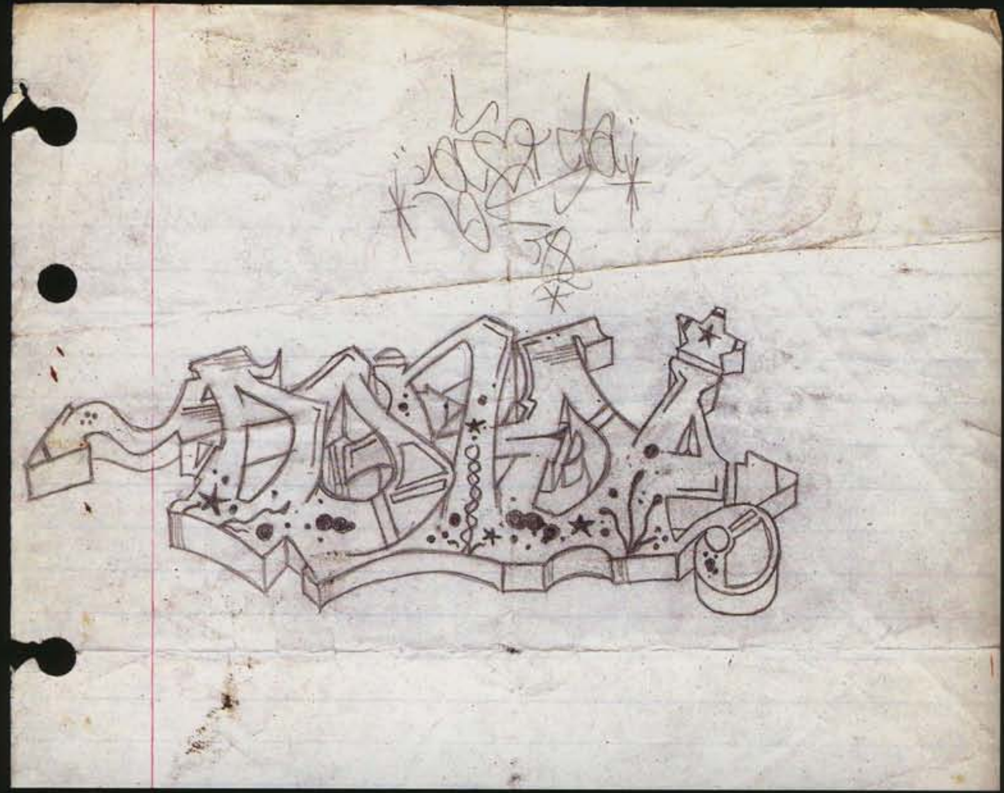




Dondi 1978

Zephyr:
Here's an example of Dondi starting to bust out with connections and arrows. He didn't want to do simple styles anymore–you can see he started to get technical. More original Red Devil paint. Notice the JEE 2 tag.

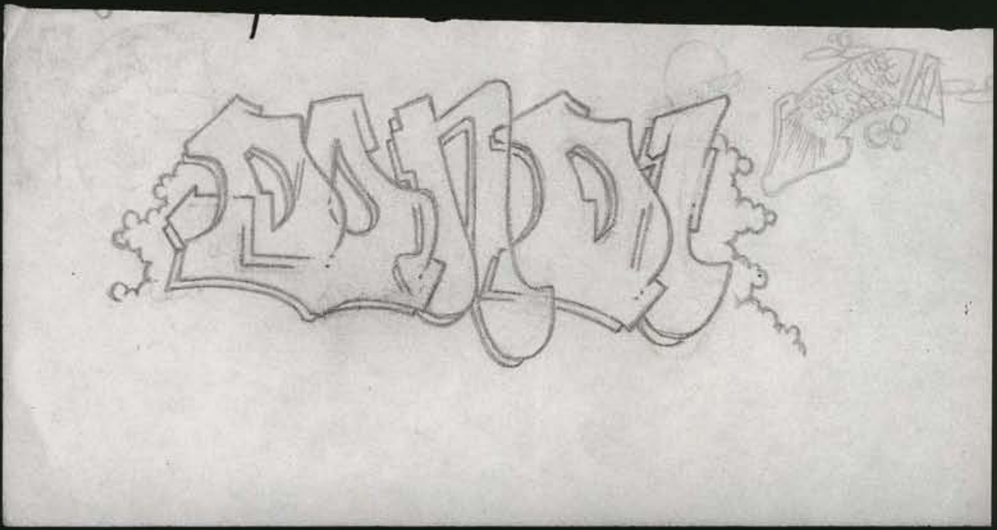
Duro:
This was in the New Lots Yard. IK was there and so was my cousin Flin Top. Flin and I were doing insides. We spent the rest of the night bombing and getting high. That same weekend Dondi did a great NACO piece.

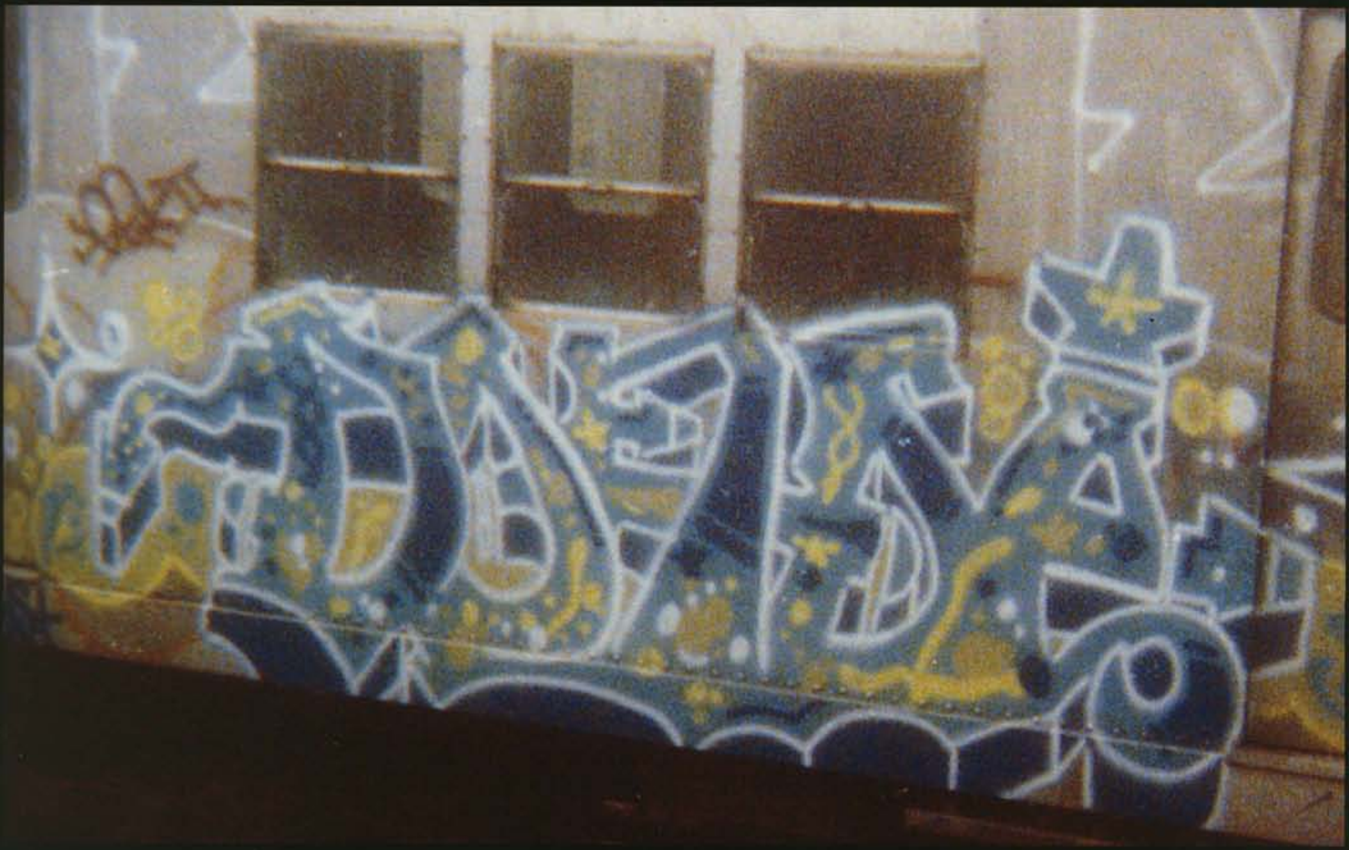


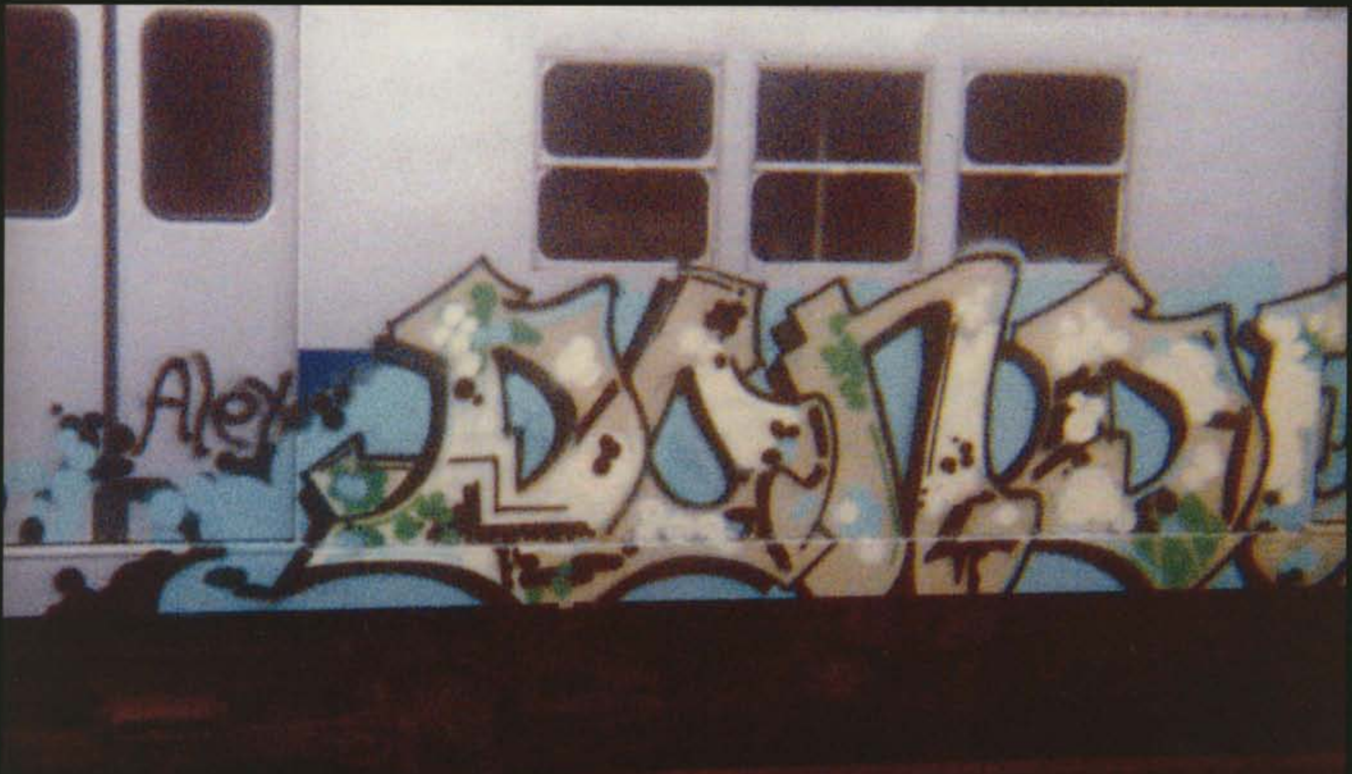
Dondi 1979

Spar:
Dondi painted this in New Lots during the day, and he noticed someone coming. It was a workbum. Dondi stopped to talk to him. The workbum liked Dondi's stuff and Dondi gave him a can of gloss black Rust-Oleum and the guy put up his name ("Alex").

Duro:
This was done on a clean car.



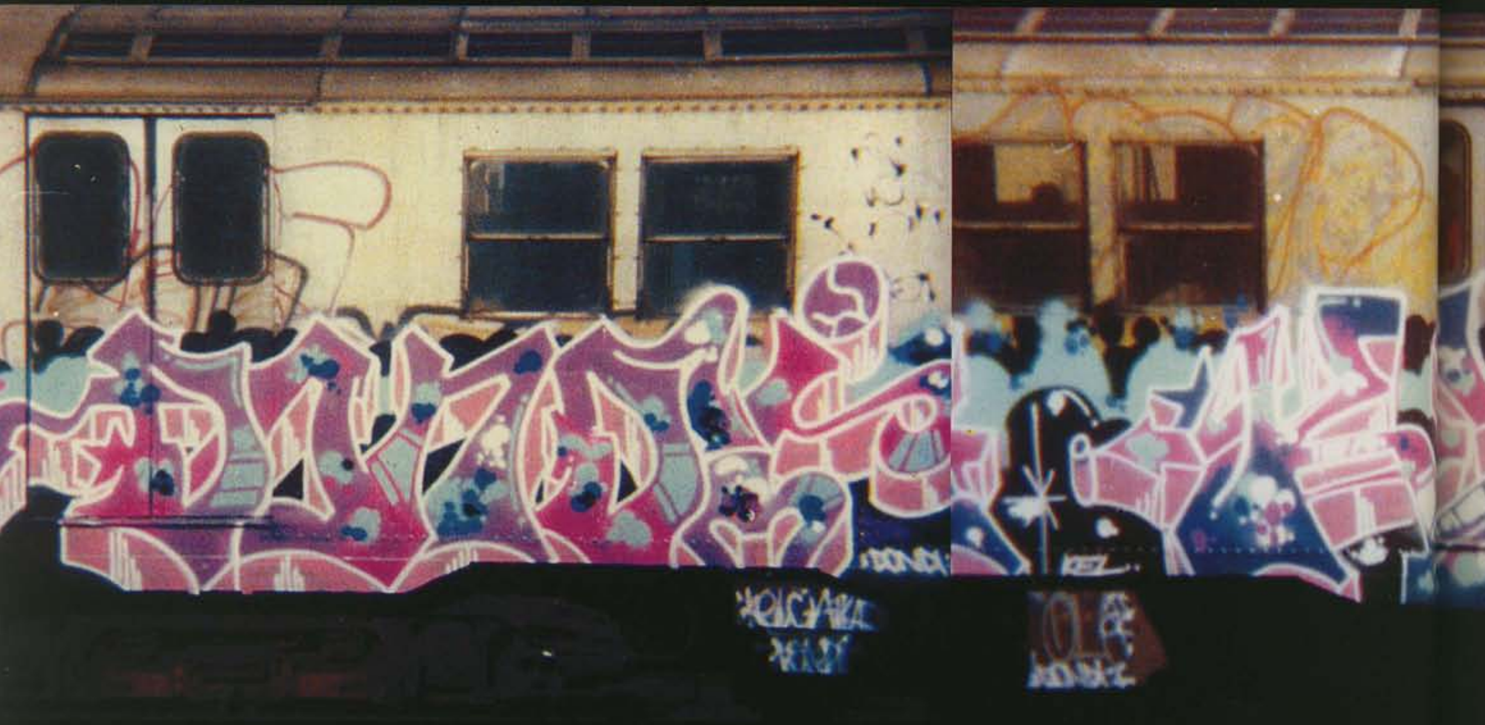


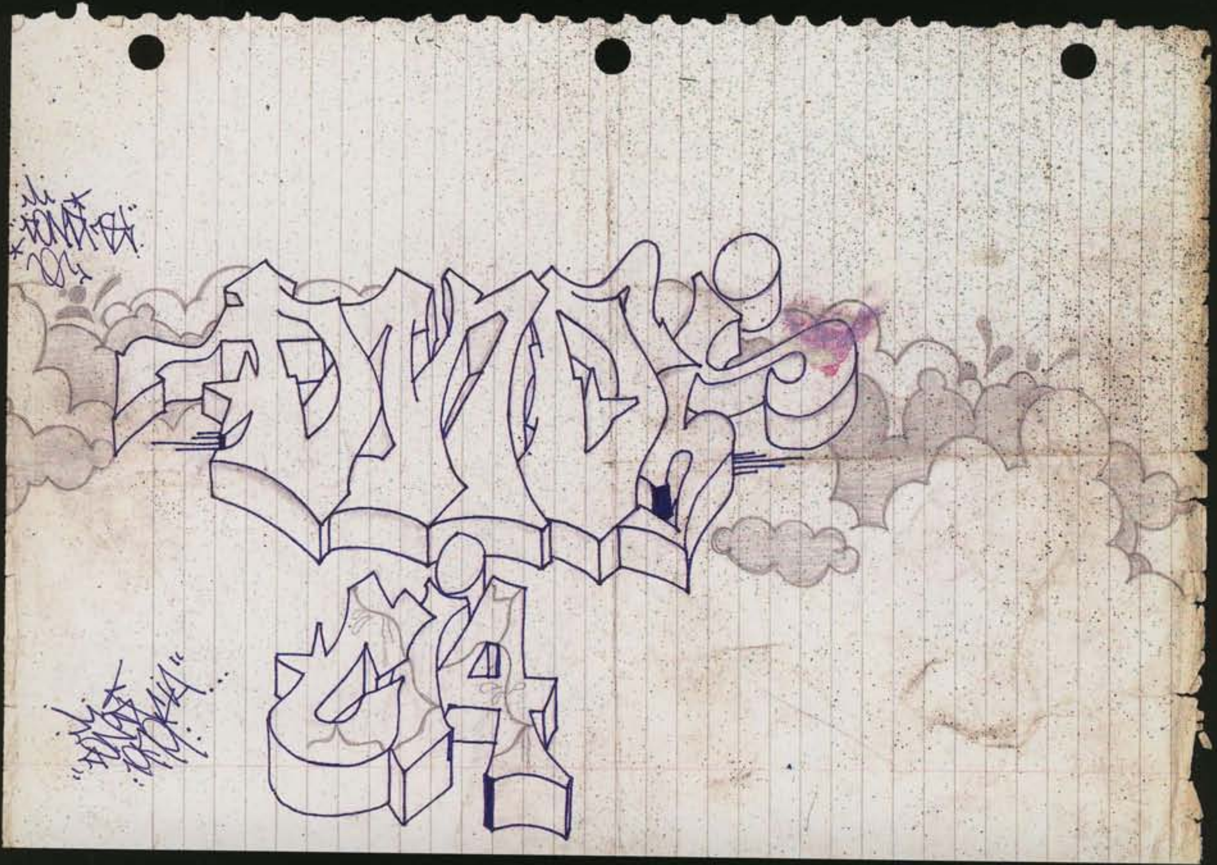


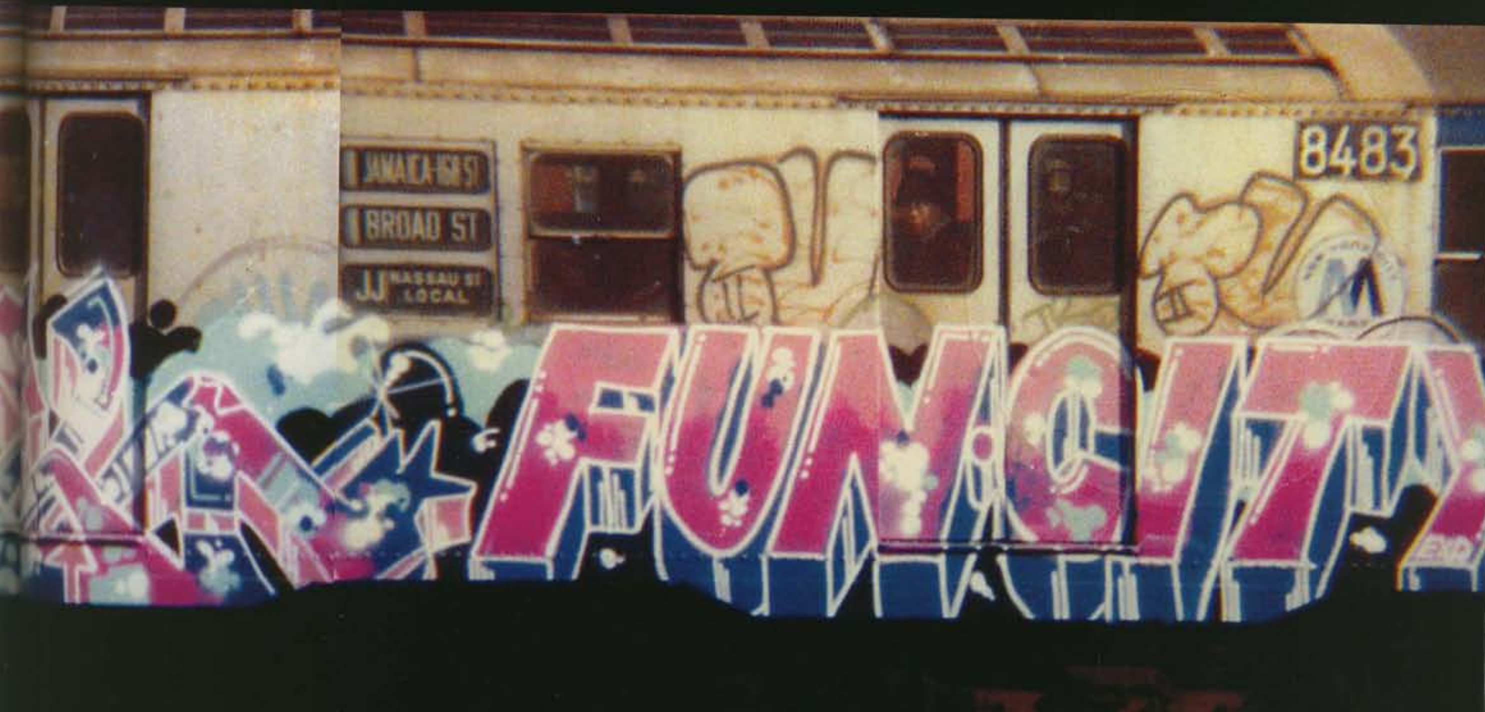
Dondi CIA + Kel FUNCITY 1978

Kel:
It was Dondi's idea to do this FUN CITY thing. I was just along for the ride. We got raided that night. Just as we finished, all the lights went on and the doors opened. Dondi said "Get beneath the train." So we laid under there for fifteen minutes before we could escape.

Zephyr:
The color scheme on this car is off the hook. Dondi must have been able to predict the future, since this car predates the actual Fun Gallery by a couple years.






JAMAICA-168 ST
BROAD ST
JJ NASSAU ST LOCAL
8483
FUN CITY

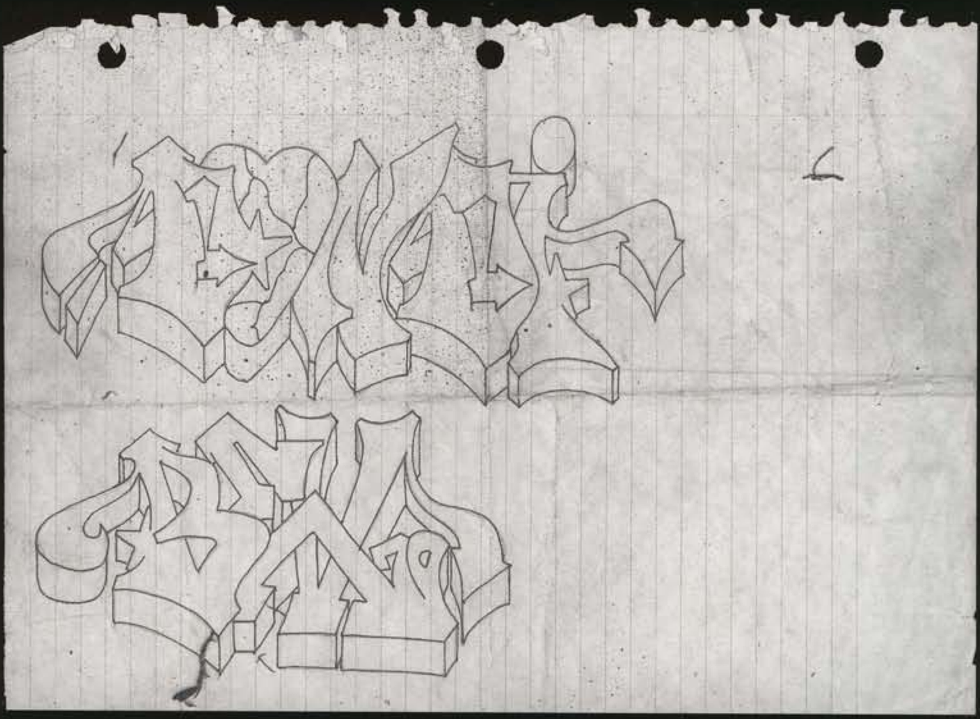
Dondi + Bev 1978

Kel + Ream + Dondi + Bev

Kel, Noc 167 (Ream), Dondi

Kel:
This is at Halsey Street Tunnel, the C train, and it was snowing outside. It was me, Dondi, and Noc. I remember Noc painted REAM. Bev was Dondi's girlfriend. She was always at his house, and she always teased me. She didn't mind us going out to paint, but she always made sure we "tagged her up."

Spar:
Dondi really loved Krylon Aqua Turquoise. I asked him about it, and he told me if I wanted it, I had to go to Vercesi's on Twenty-third Street. Dondi was the one who schooled me on all the colors.

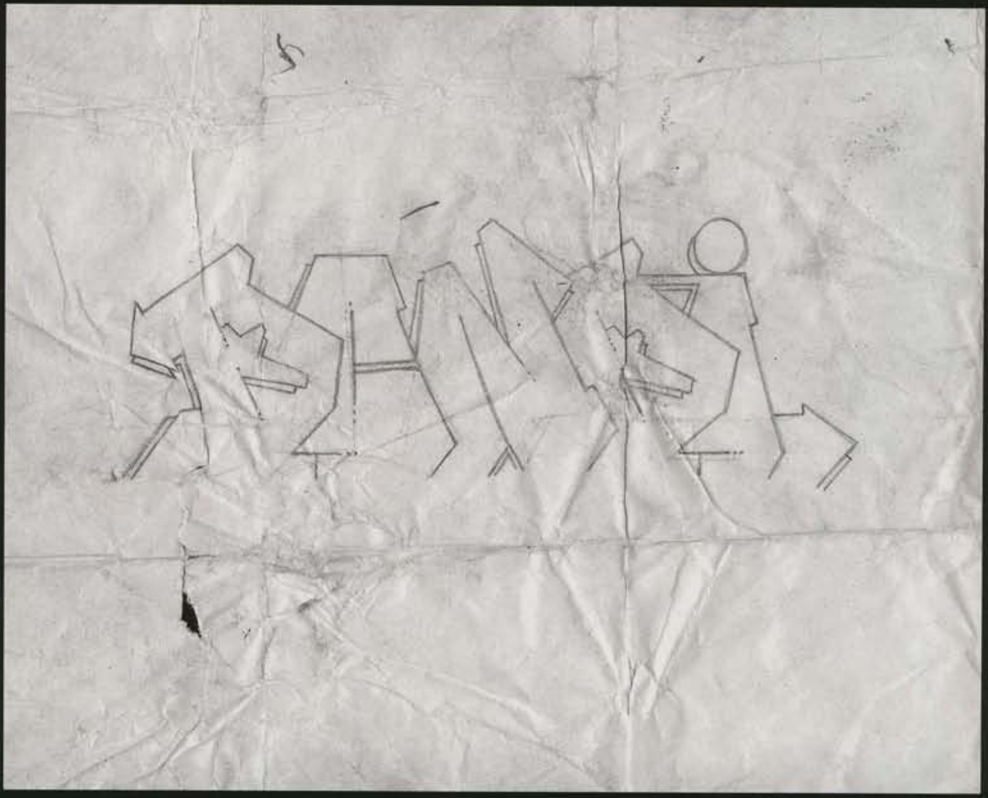


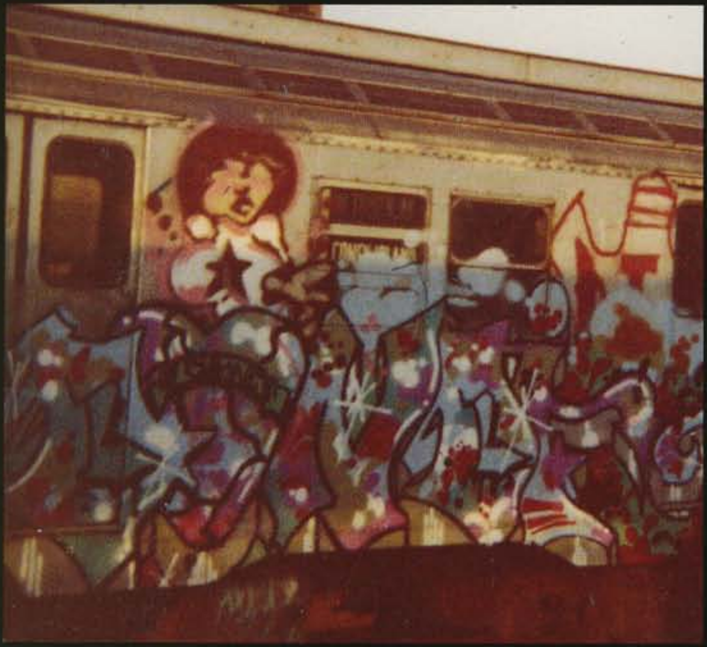
Dondi 1980

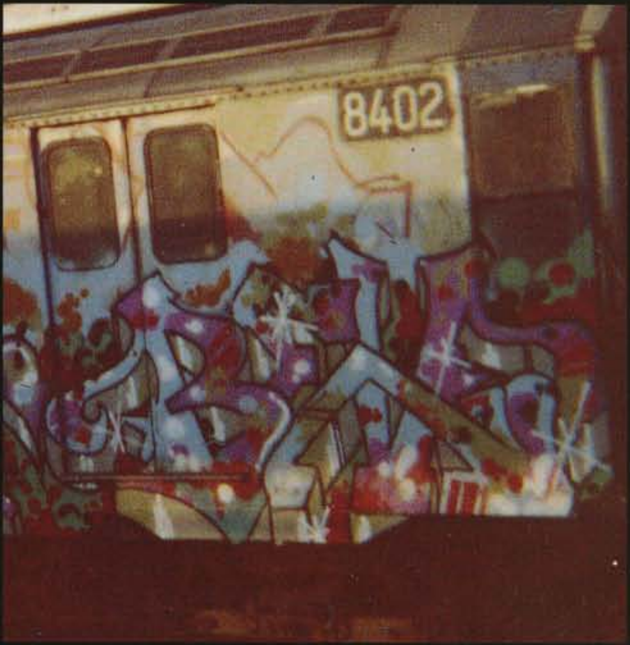
Dondi + Duro

Duro:
This was done in New Lots in the pouring rain. This was a married couple with a SLAVE piece. We were falling down drunk. We had been hanging out and he decided to go to the yard. There were only three cars in the yard, so we had to do this out in the open. The rain fucked it up a little, but it came out nice. We were there for hours that night.

Kel:
This letter style is a great example of Noc's influence on us.



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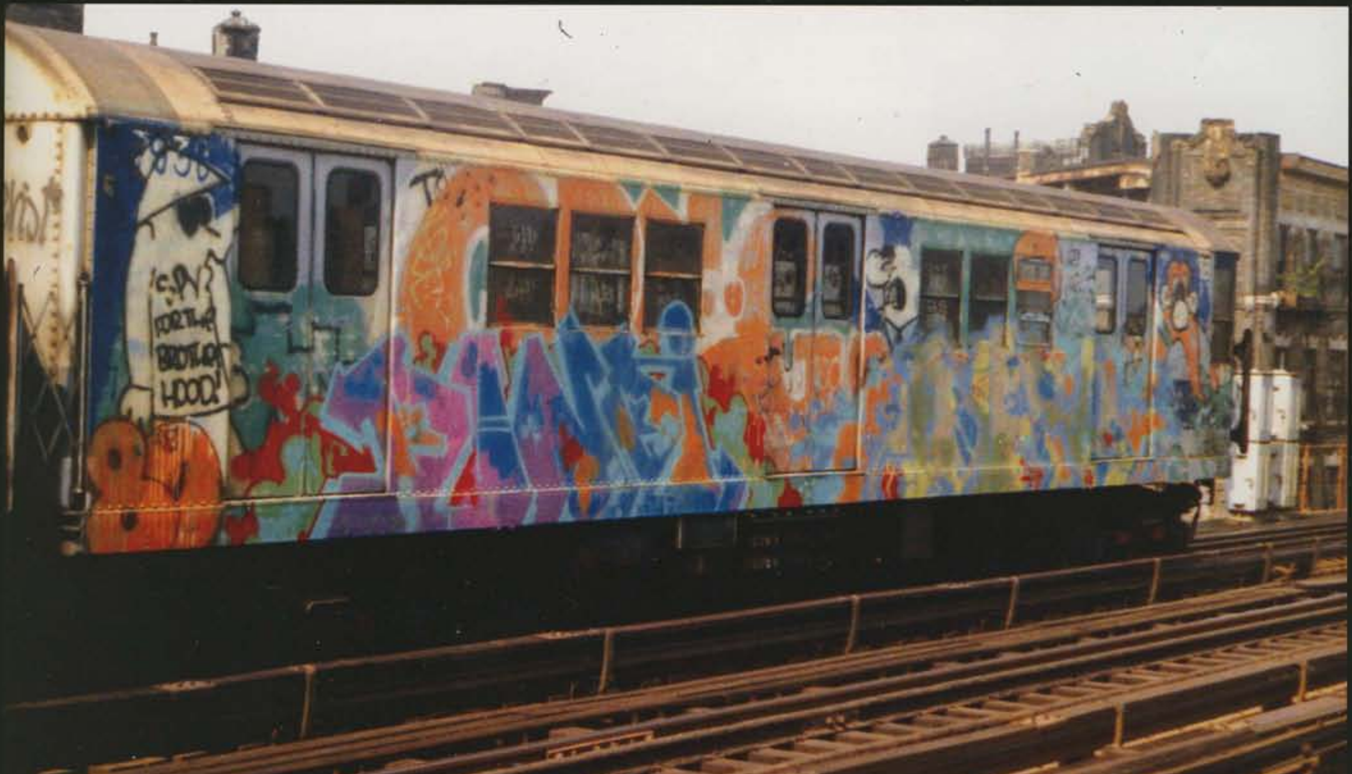
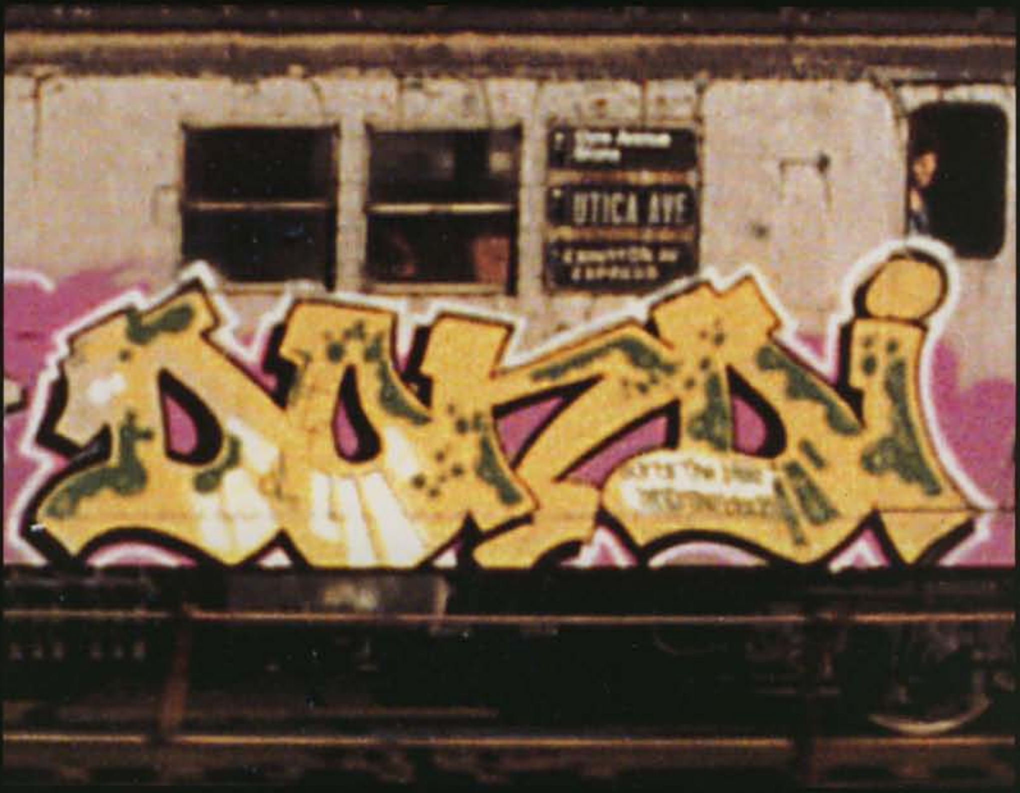

FOR THE BROTHER HOOD!

Dondi 1981
Dream + Dondi

Duro:
Fuzz and Dondi and I saw this the day after it was painted. They had done five whole cars over a three night span.

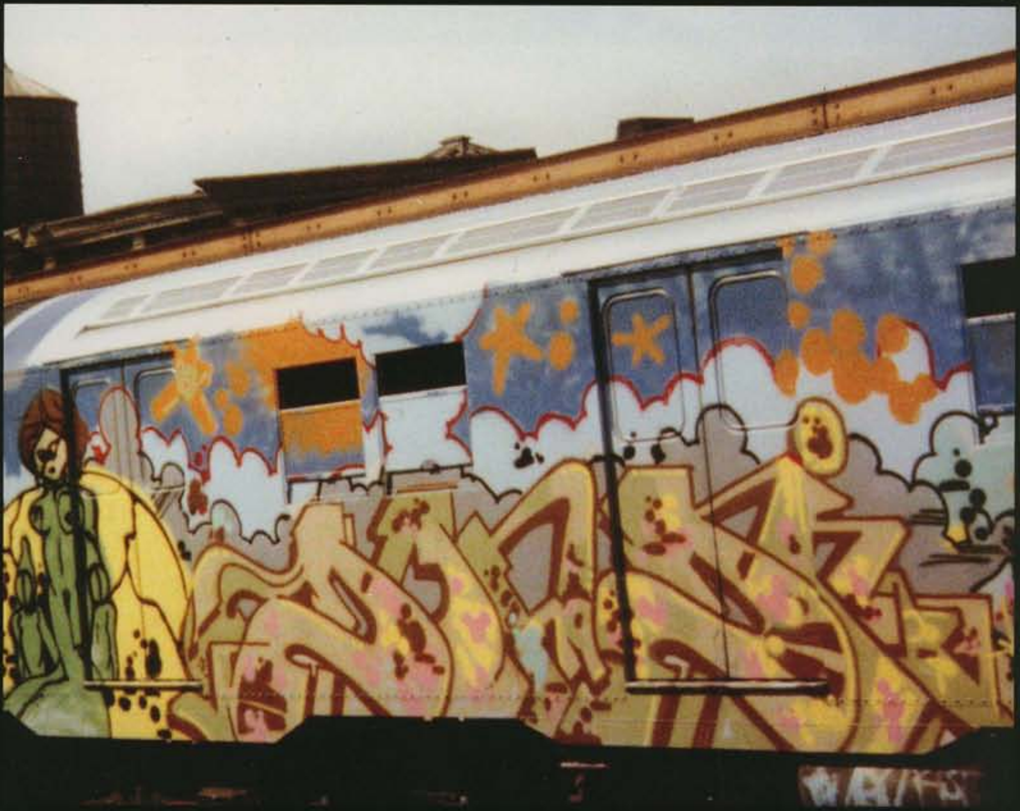
Zephyr:
This piece was done with Dream, one of Fuzz's big partners. It's interesting that Dondi adopted a Fuzz style for this car.

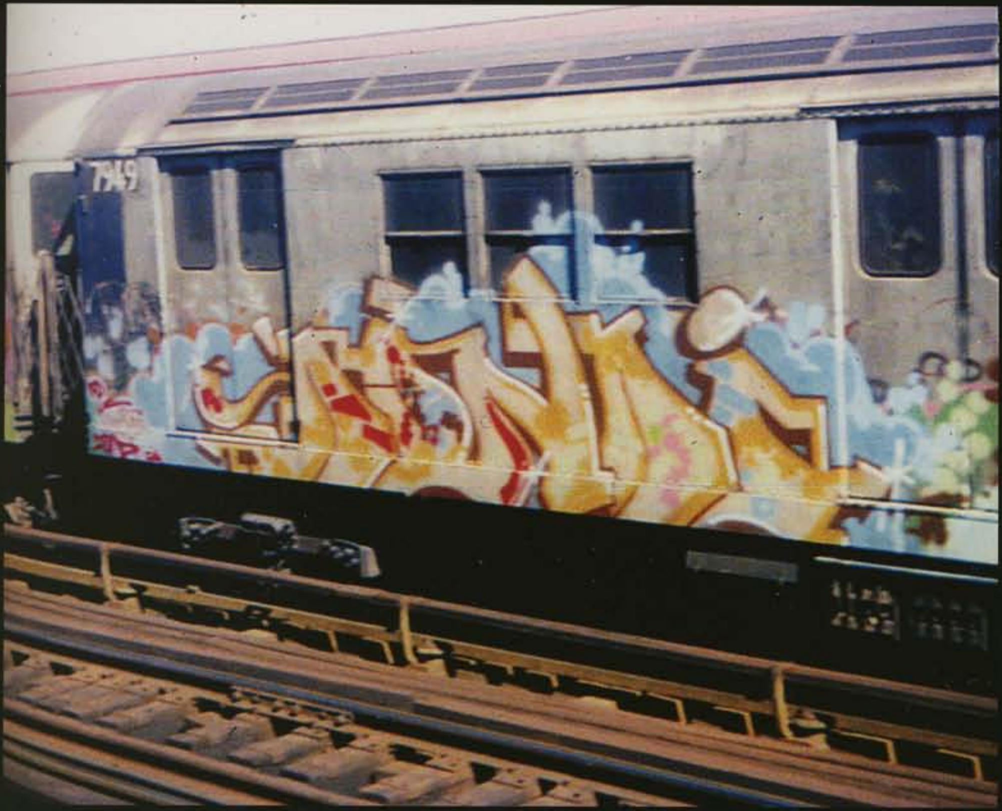


Dondi 1979
Dondi + Sono + Welch
Dondi, Duro (Sono), Kel (Welch)

Kel:
A lot of the time when we painted on the J train, Dondi would do outlines for everyone. Not on the train, but on paper. Then we'd all compare our outlines and fight to change them if we didn't feel they were as good as the others. I wasn't trying to settle for less.

Spar:
Dondi told me he lost a black book the night he painted this. They got raided, which explains the unfinished background.



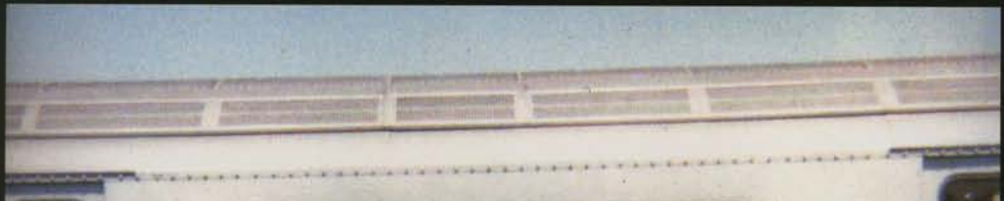


Dondi 1980

Dondi + Duro

Duro:

This was one of eight whole cars. Me, Butch, Kase, Kel, Daze, Crash. We went to Esses studio to piece. Me, Dondi, and Kel all did canvases. Butch and Kase came, and Kase wound up snatching a huge amount of paint. Then, when we got to the station, Fed TMT and his guys were across the platform. While doing this whole car, I fell from a large divider onto the tracks. Kase and Butch yelled at Dondi, "Your boy Duro is on the 3rd Rail."



Dondism 1979

Dondism + Dealt

Dondi, Kel (Dealt)

Kel:

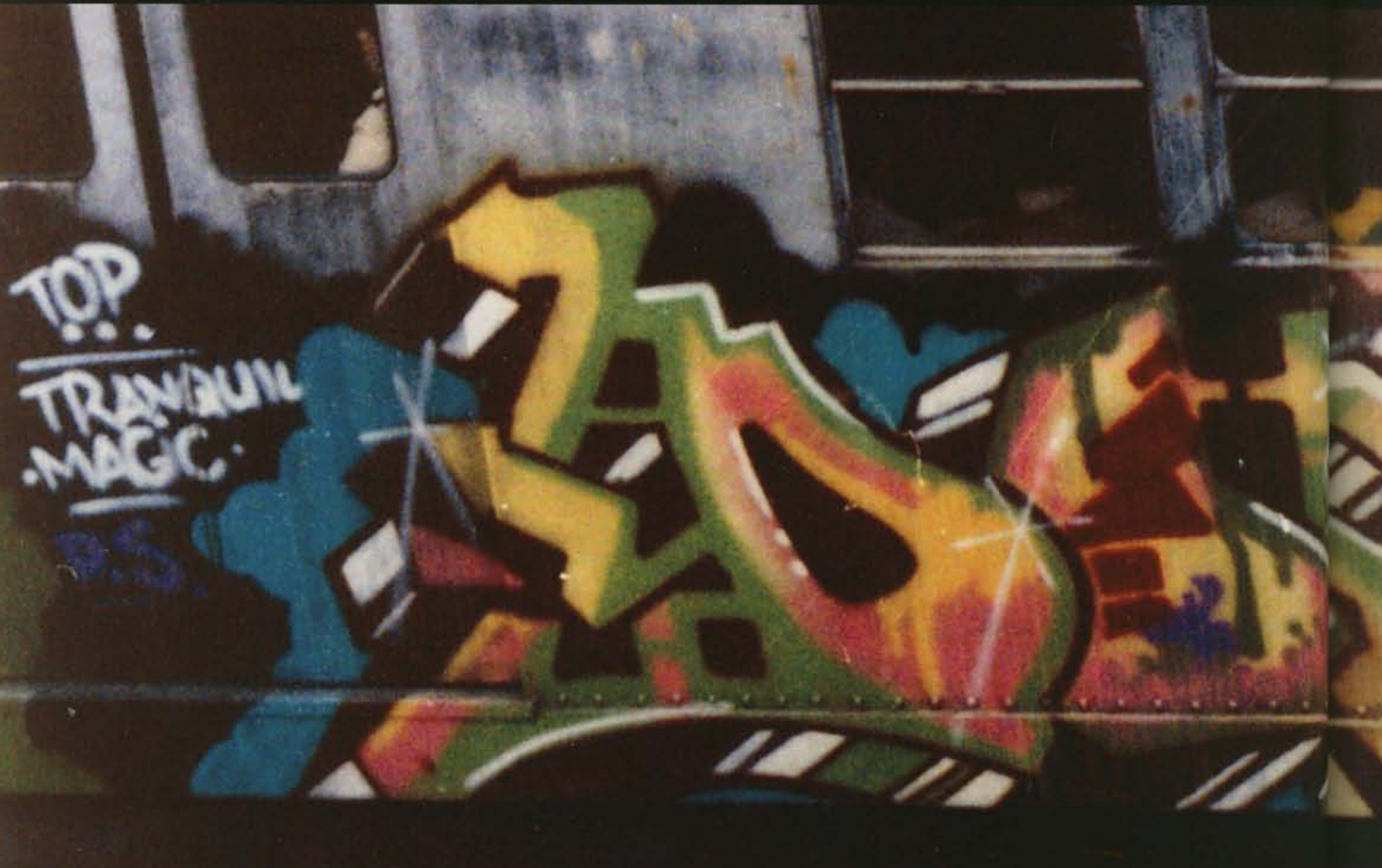
This was a brand new silver car. We caught this in the No. 2 Yard. I wasn't really feeling the bubble style. I would have rather done something wilder, especially for a No. 2 train, which would run through the Bronx.

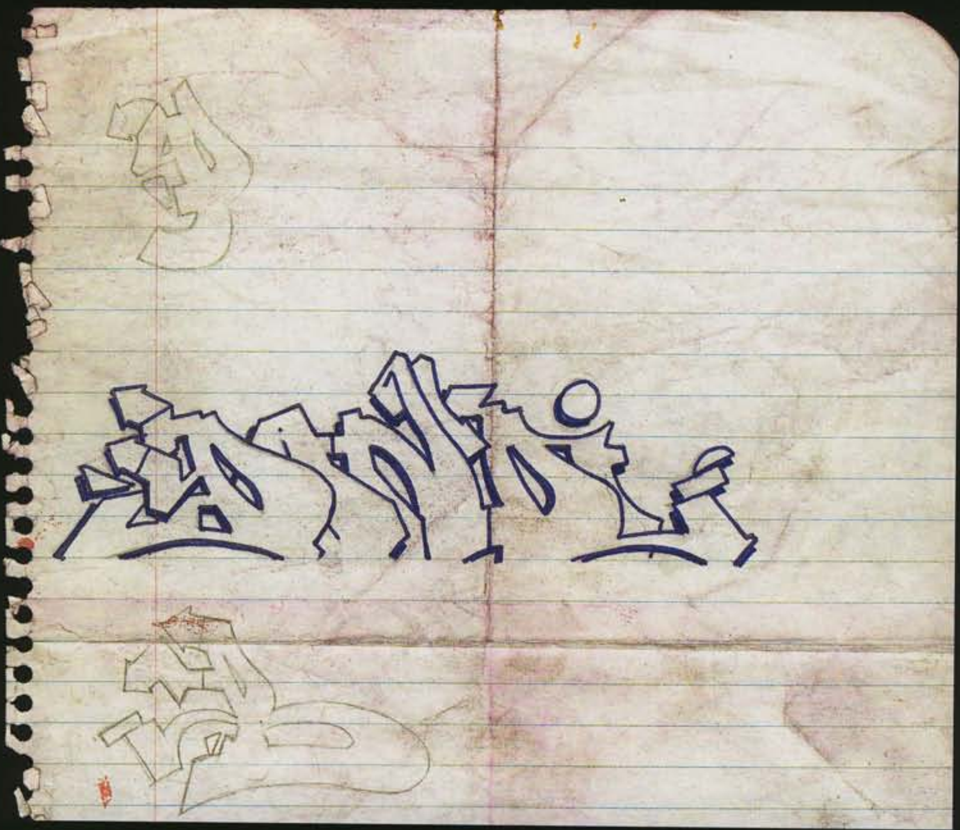
Dondi 1980

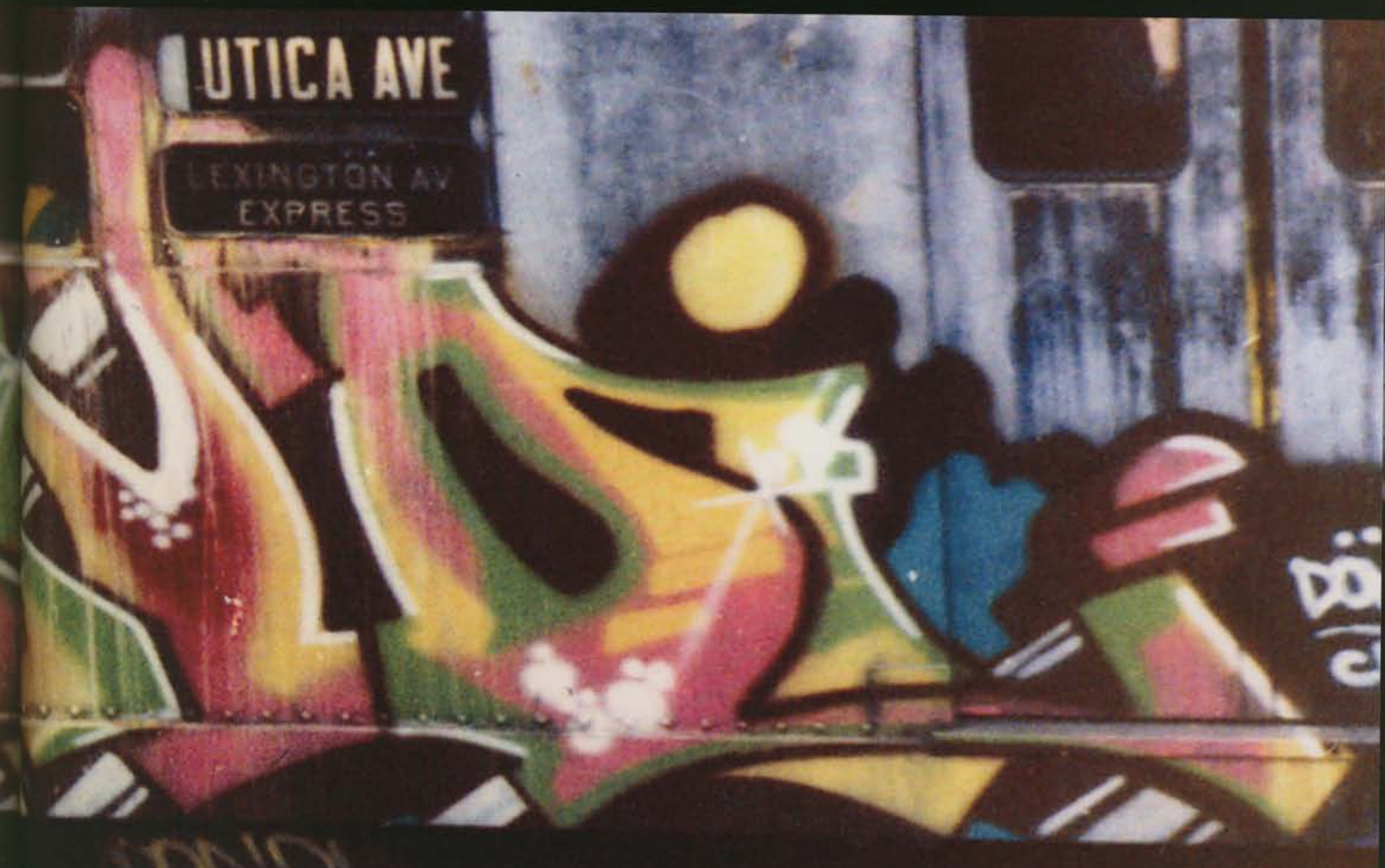
Boy 5 + Dondi

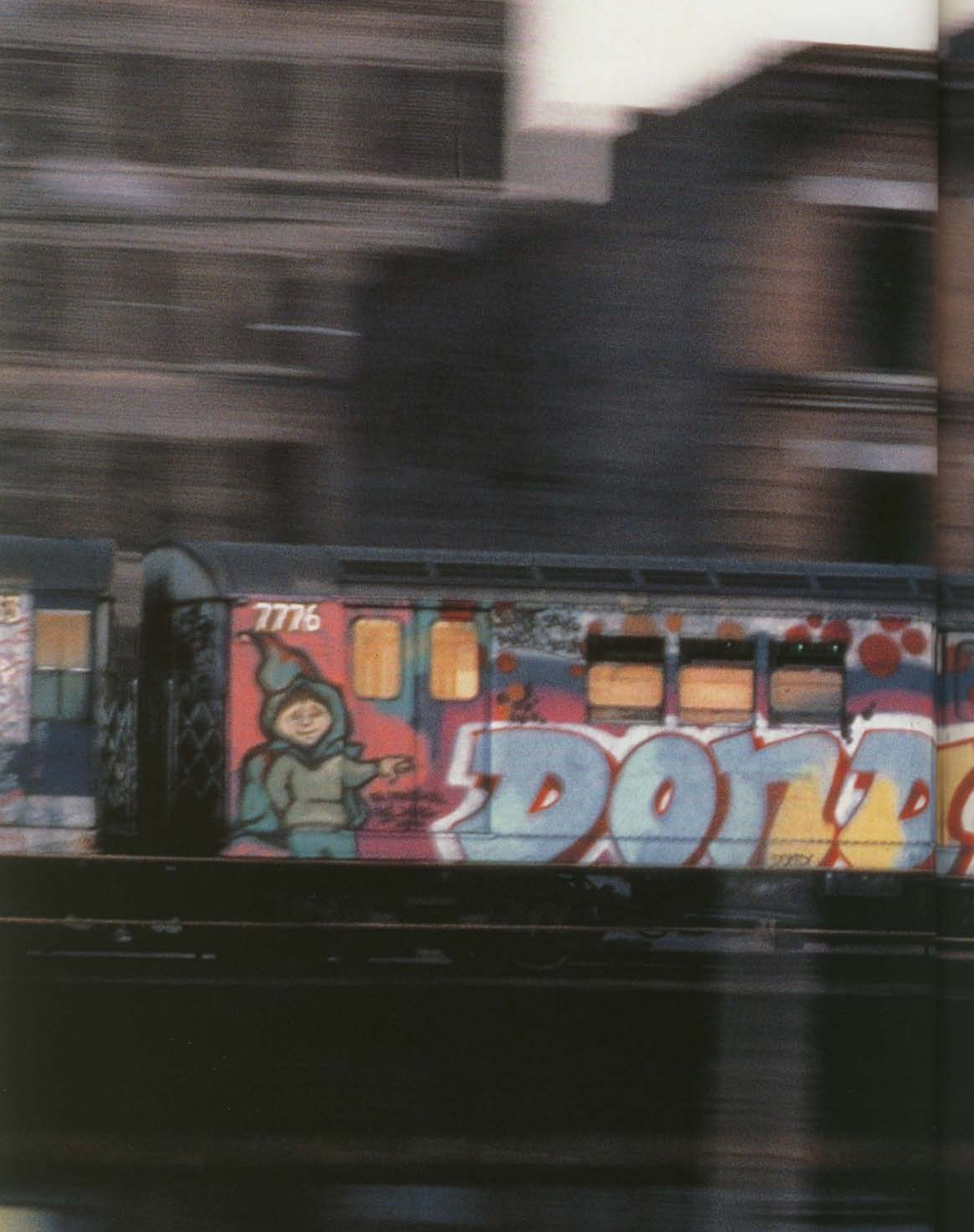
Noc 167 (Boy 5), Dondi

Duro:
This was the Boy 5 and Dondi car after the BUS + BOY whole car. (see p. 84) Dondi said he didn't like the BUS + BOY car because he thought Noc burned him, so he retaliated on this car.






UTICA AVE
LEXINGTON AV
EXPRESS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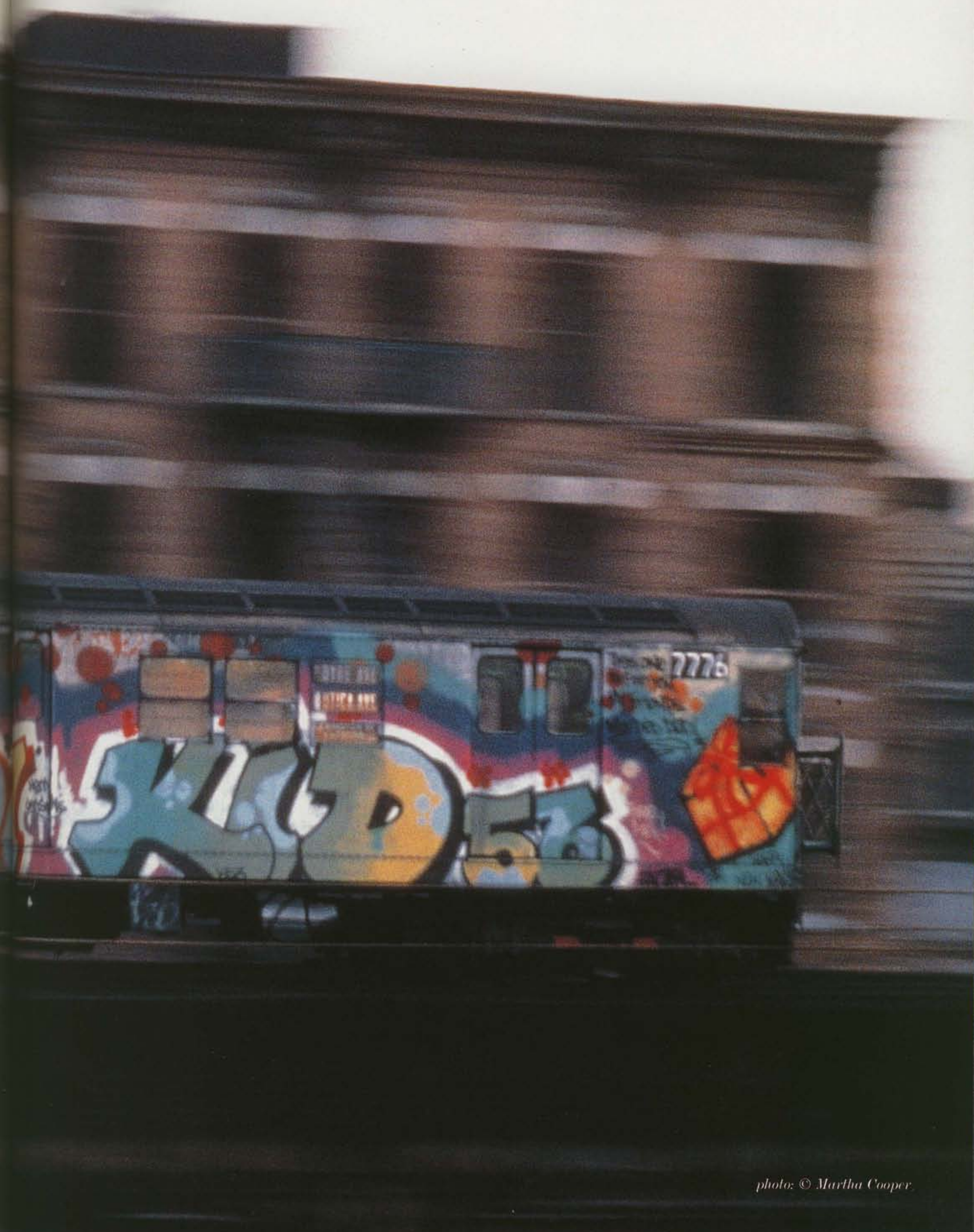
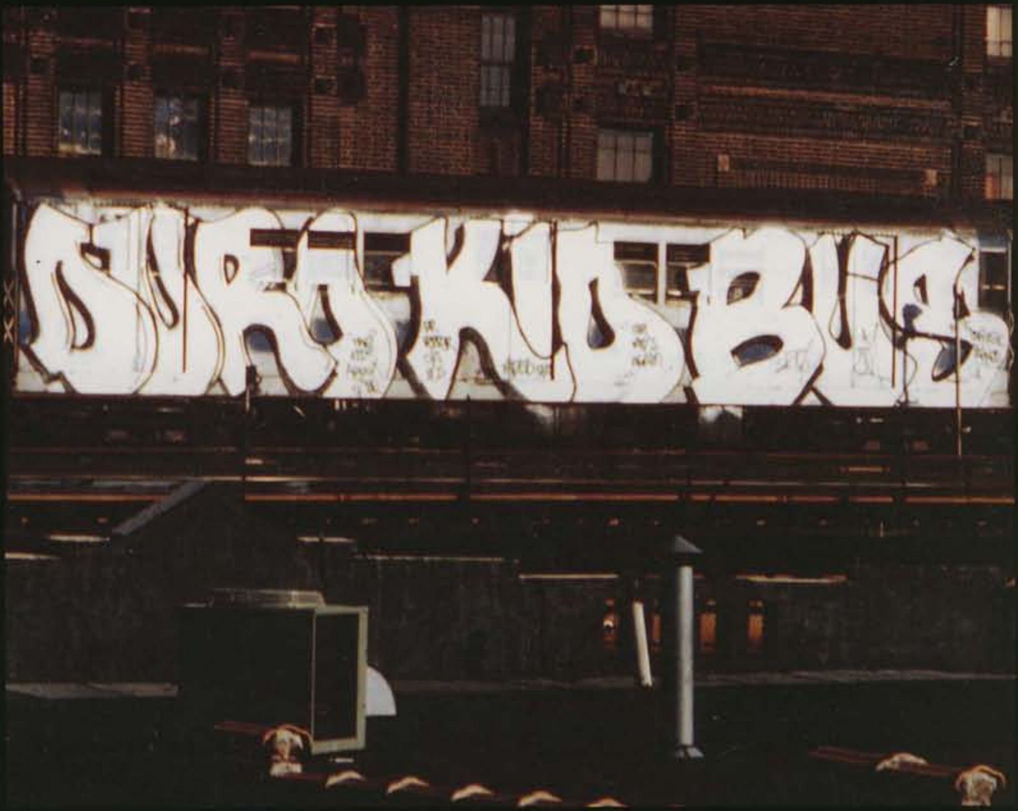


photo: © Martha Cooper

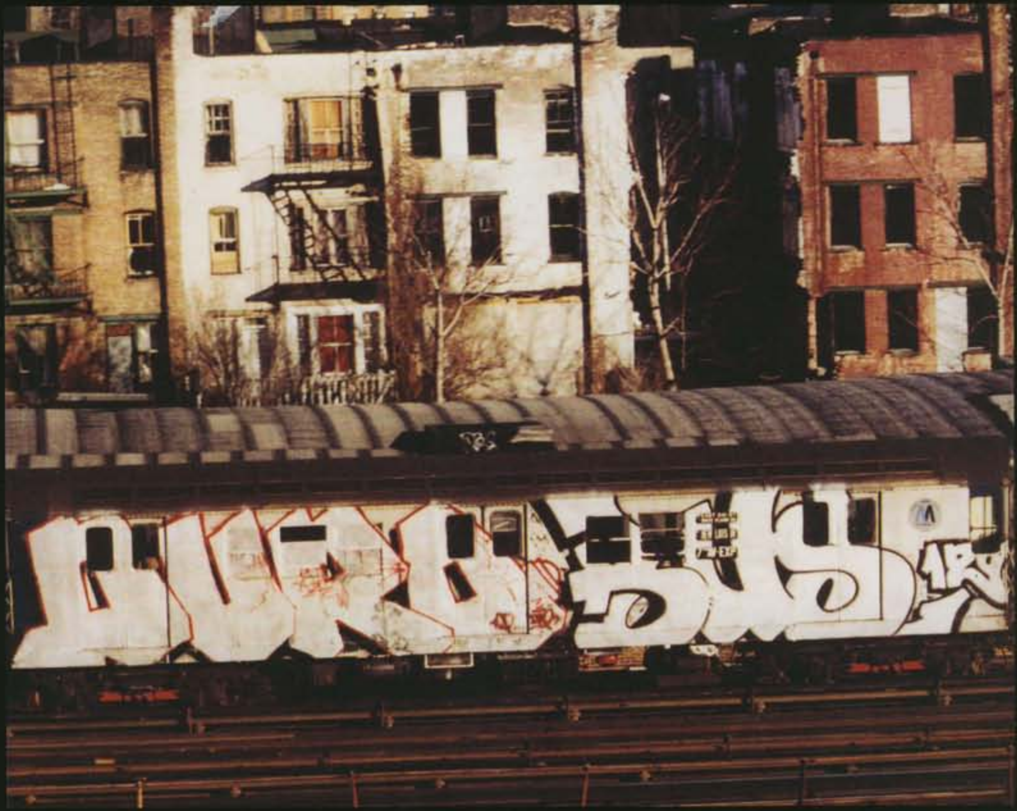
Duro + Kid + Bus 1980
Duro, Kid, Dondi (Bus)
photo: © Martha Cooper

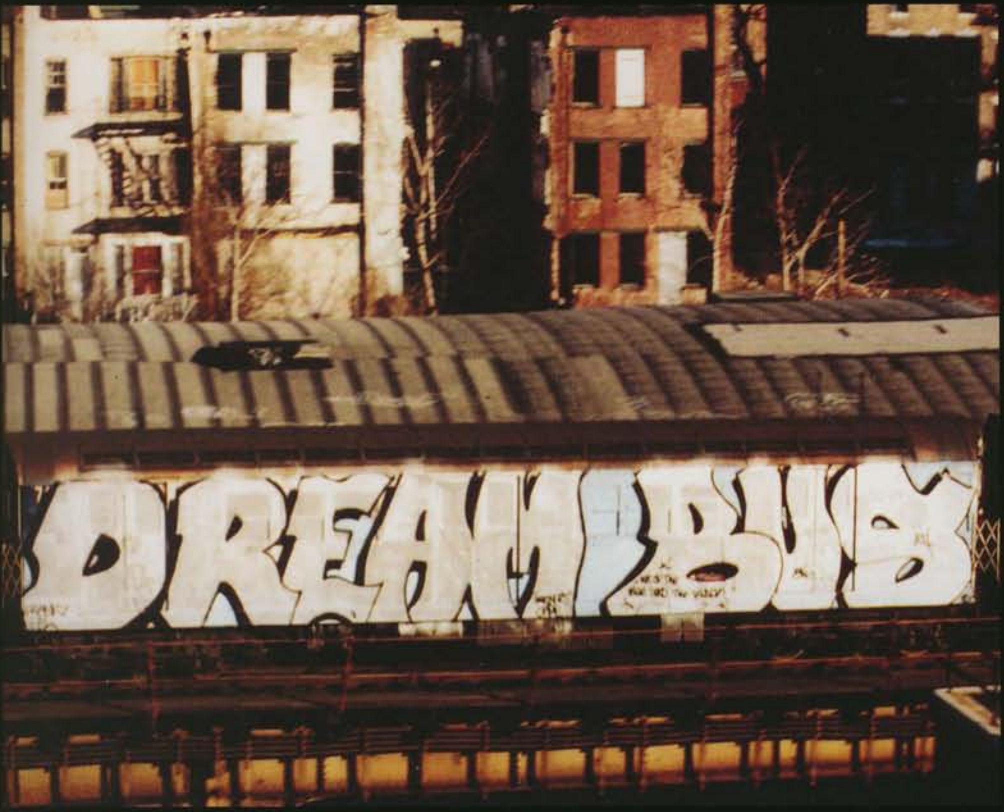
Doc:
These are what they are. They had a lot of silver paint and somebody was taking pictures. These are like tags for Dondi.



Duro + Bus 1982
Duro, Dondi (Bus)
photo: © Martha Cooper

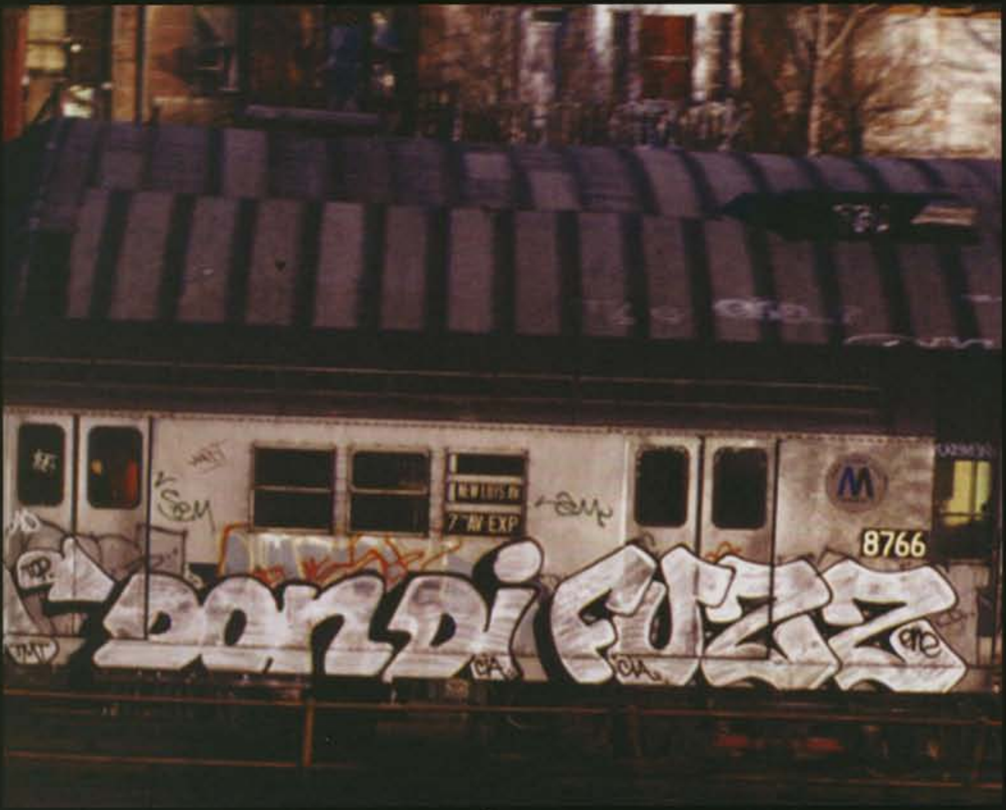
Duro:
This was the same night as the CODE top to bottom. We were still using Dr. Pepper's paint.





Dream + Bus 1980
Dream, Dondi (Bus)
photo: © Martha Cooper

Daze:
Silver blockbusters were things that Dondi did when he had left over paint. He never liked to leave a yard with paint. They also often acted as "markers" that would alert you to the fact that there was a wild-style on the other side of the car.



Dondi + Fuzz 1981
photo: © Martha Cooper

8996

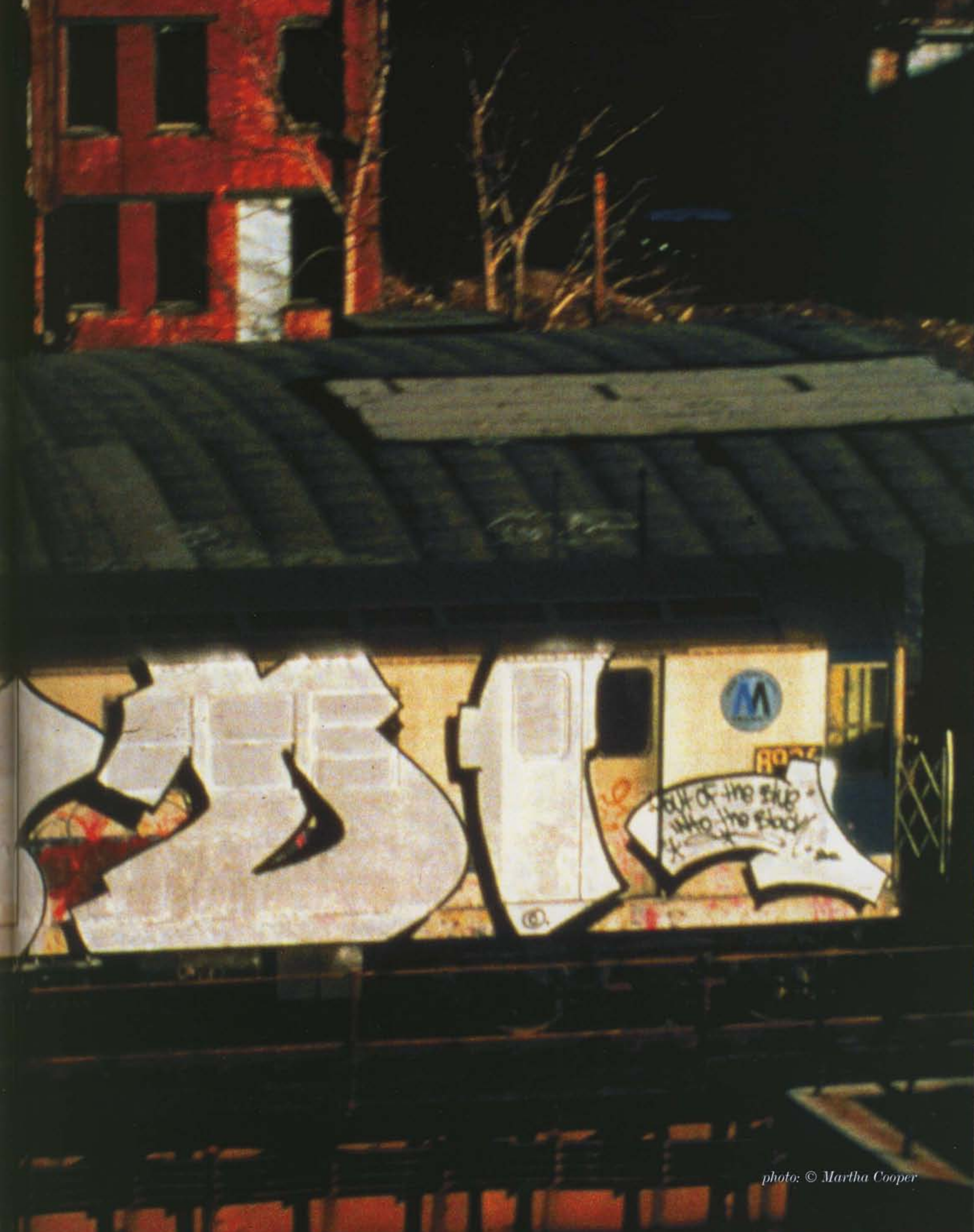
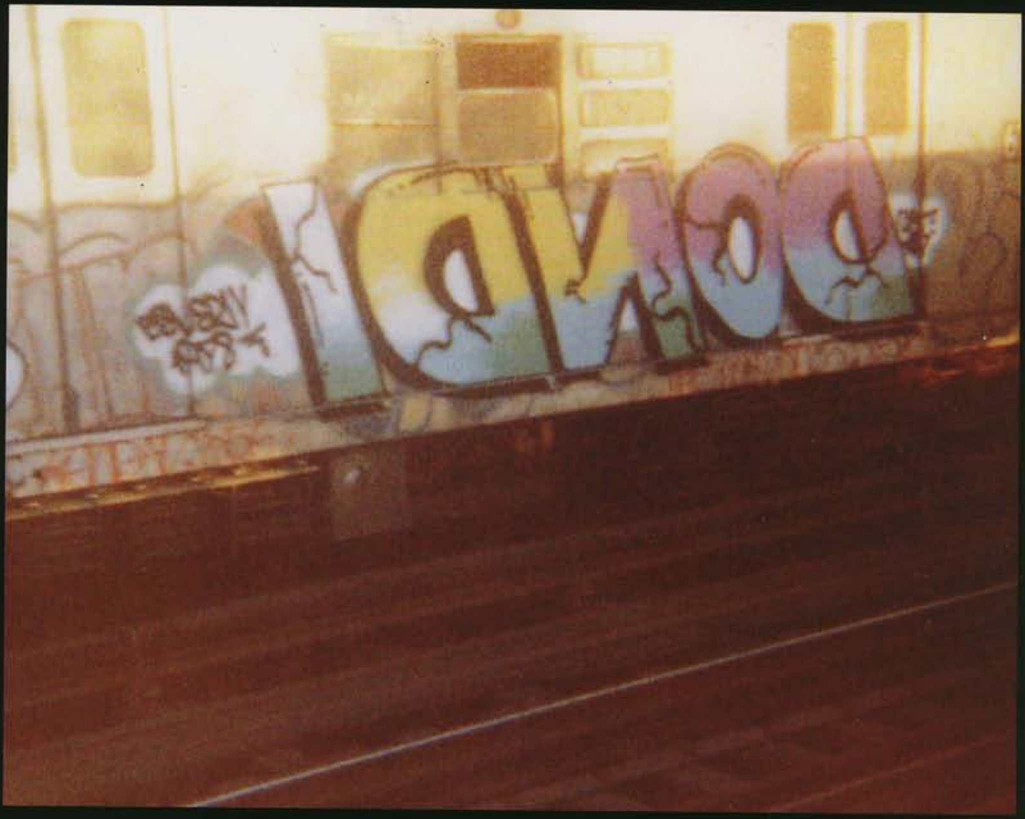

out of the blue
into the black

photo: © Martha Cooper

Dondi 1978

Spar:
This is a No. 4 train. It was extremely rare for Dondi to paint on the 4's.

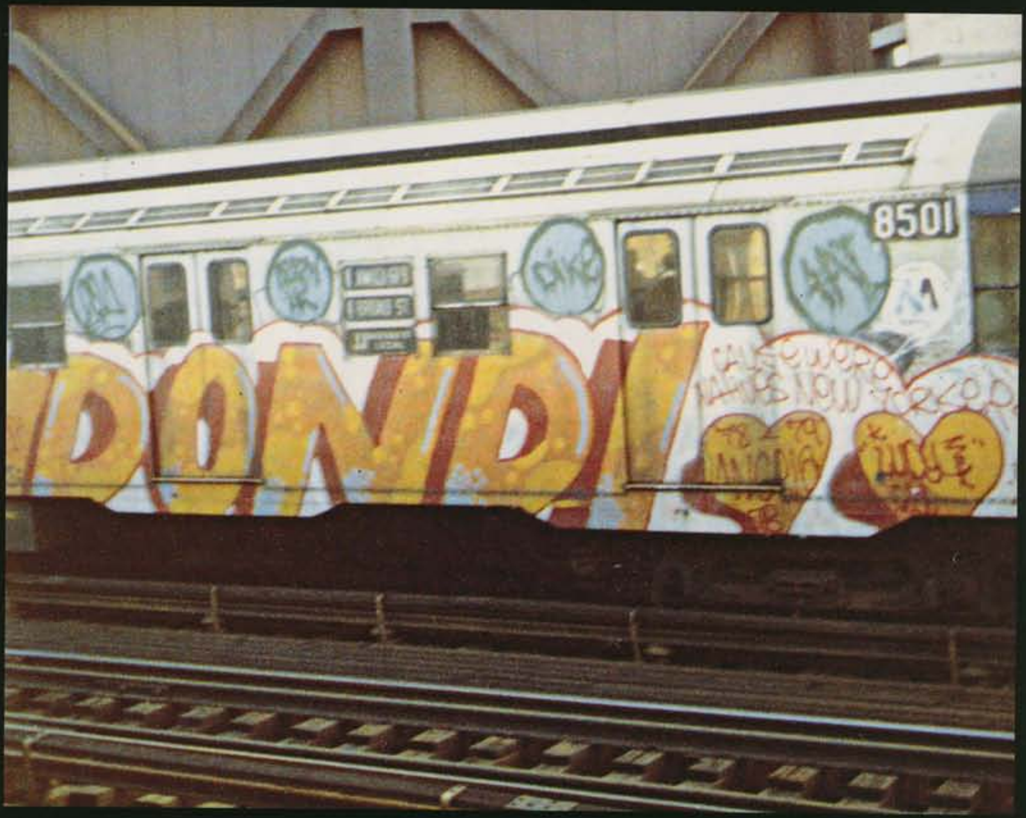
Zephyr:
These backwards pieces got a lot of attention. I like the comic book style cracks.

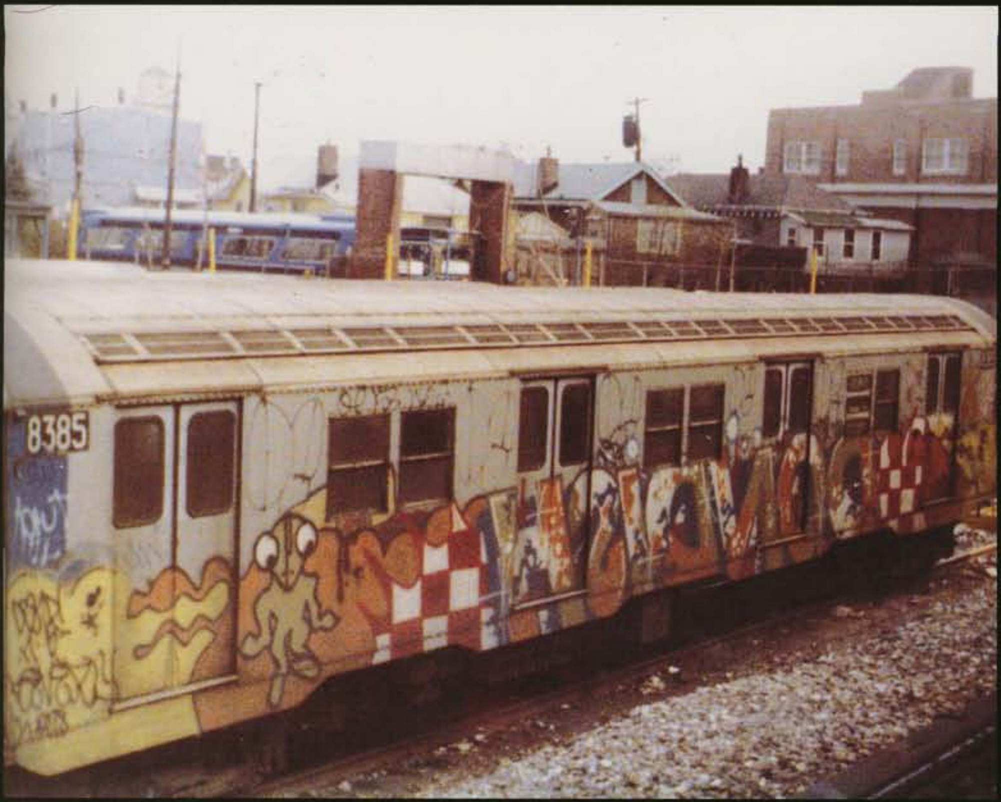


Dondi 1978

Mickey + Dondi

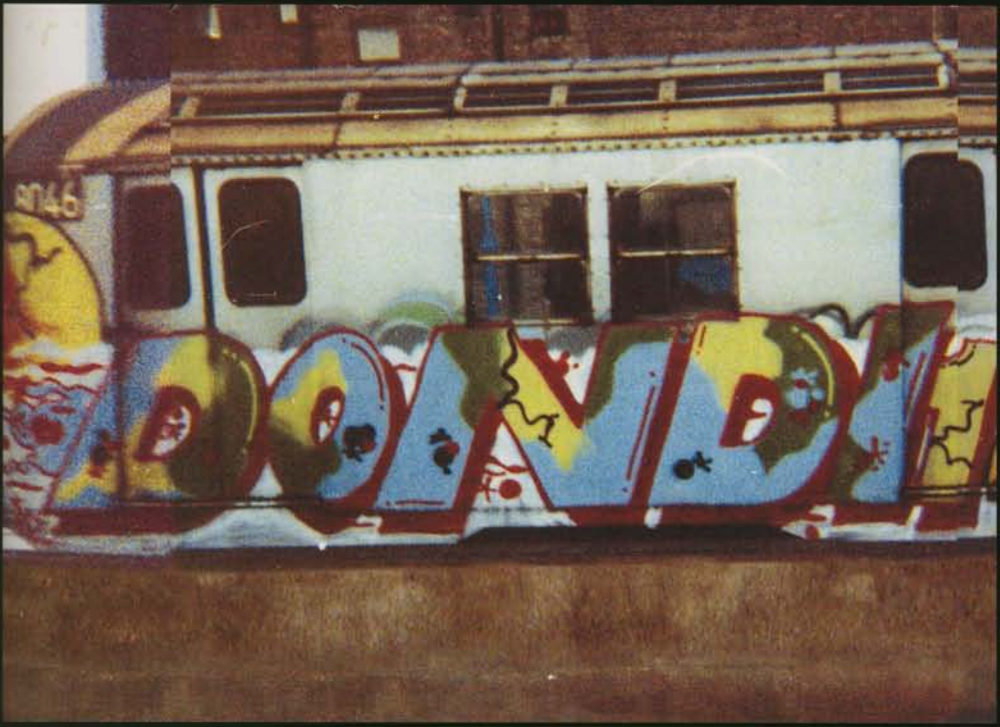
Kel:
This was the first time I painted in Brooklyn. Duro was there–he was writing SONO. I asked Dondi why he was doing the straight letter style; he felt that the whole line was toy, and not worth the effort to do a wild-style piece.





Dondish 1978

Daze:
A lot of the elements here pre-date a lot of things that Dondi would eventually develop: *the checkerboard*, the character. Also, when Dondi started doing these backward pieces, when we saw them in photos, we all thought the negatives had gotten reversed.

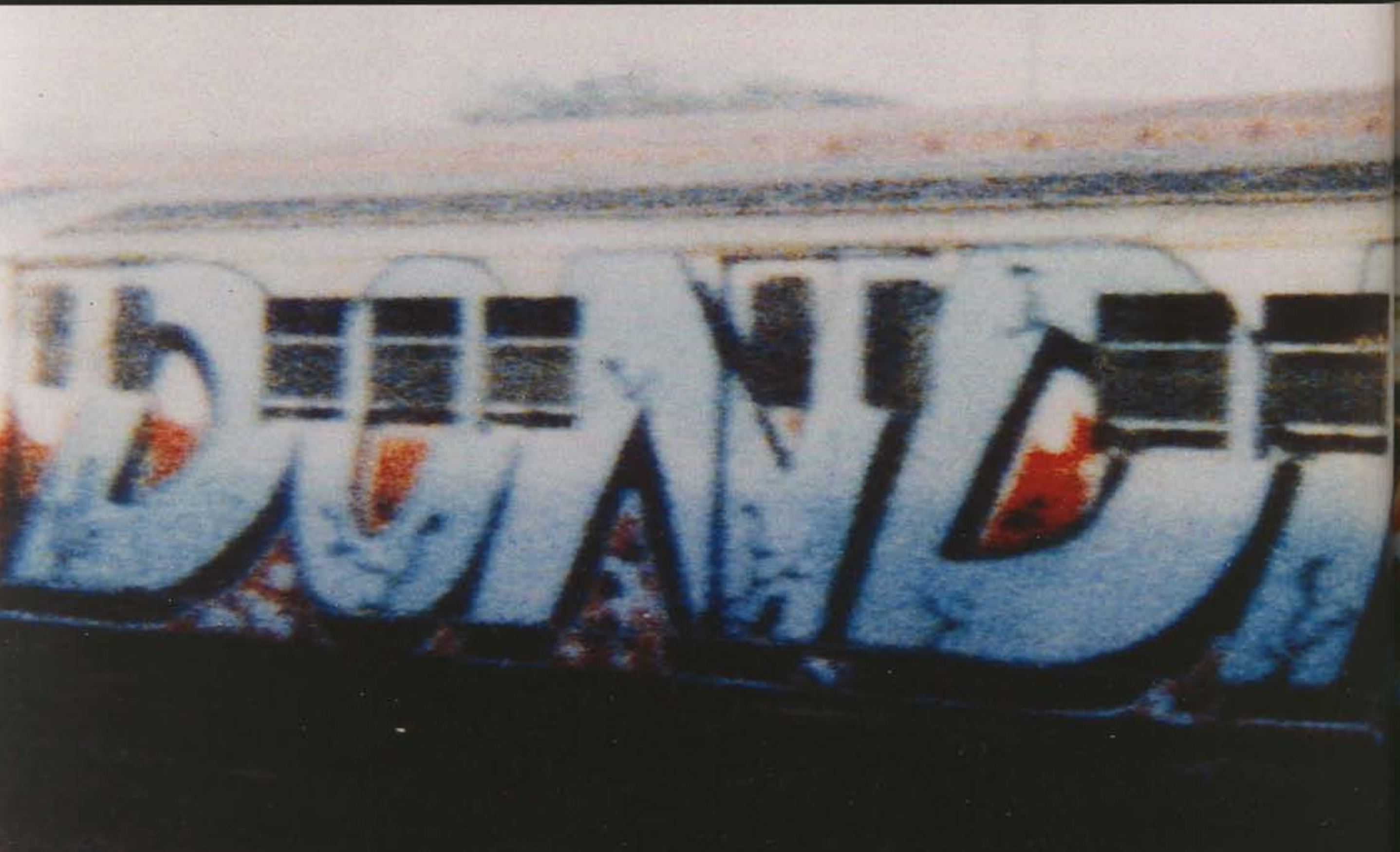


Dondi 1 1978
Dondi 1 + Kid 56

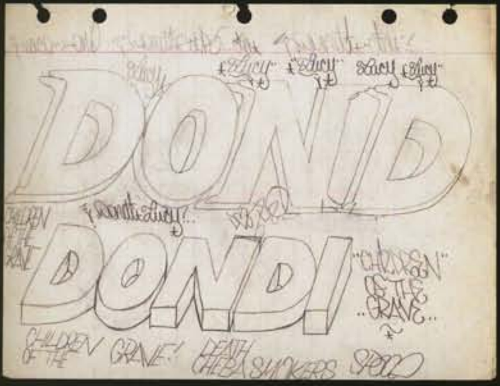
Zephyr:
Before Dondi began to tear up the IRT's he honed his painting skills on the BMT's. Even early on, Dondi knew the best ways to make a big impact with his name.

CHILDREN of the GRAVE

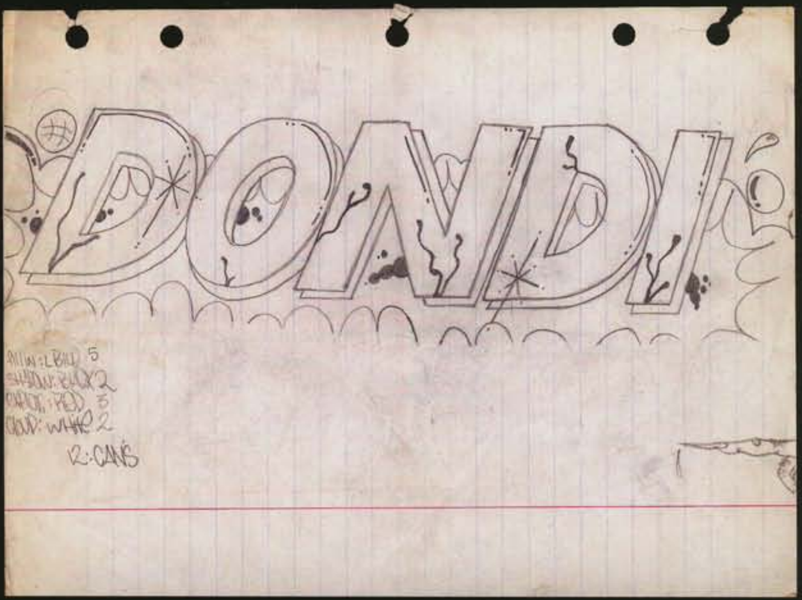
The name "Children of the Grave" was inspired by a song of the same name by the heavy metal band Black Sabbath. Between the years 1978 and 1980, Dondi painted three Dondi whole-cars which he titled *Children of the Grave* parts *1, 2* and *3*, respectively. Although fewer people remember the first one (pictured here), the *Children of the Grave* cars *2* and *3* are considered among the most famous and iconic pieces ever painted by any writer during New York's twenty-year subway art history.



1978


DOND
Dondi & Lucy
DONDI
"CHILDREN" OF THE GRAVE...
CHILDREN OF THE GRAVE!
DEATH CHEBA SMOKERS
SPEED

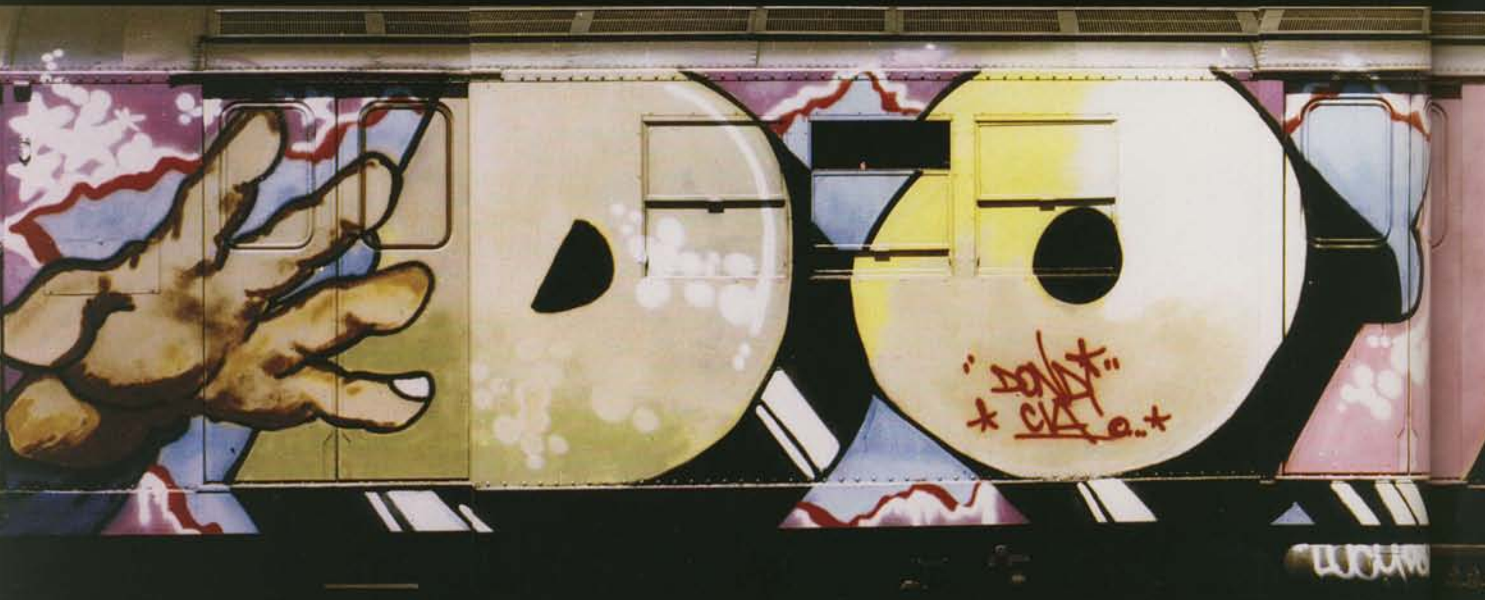
Sketches for Children of the Grave 1 1978

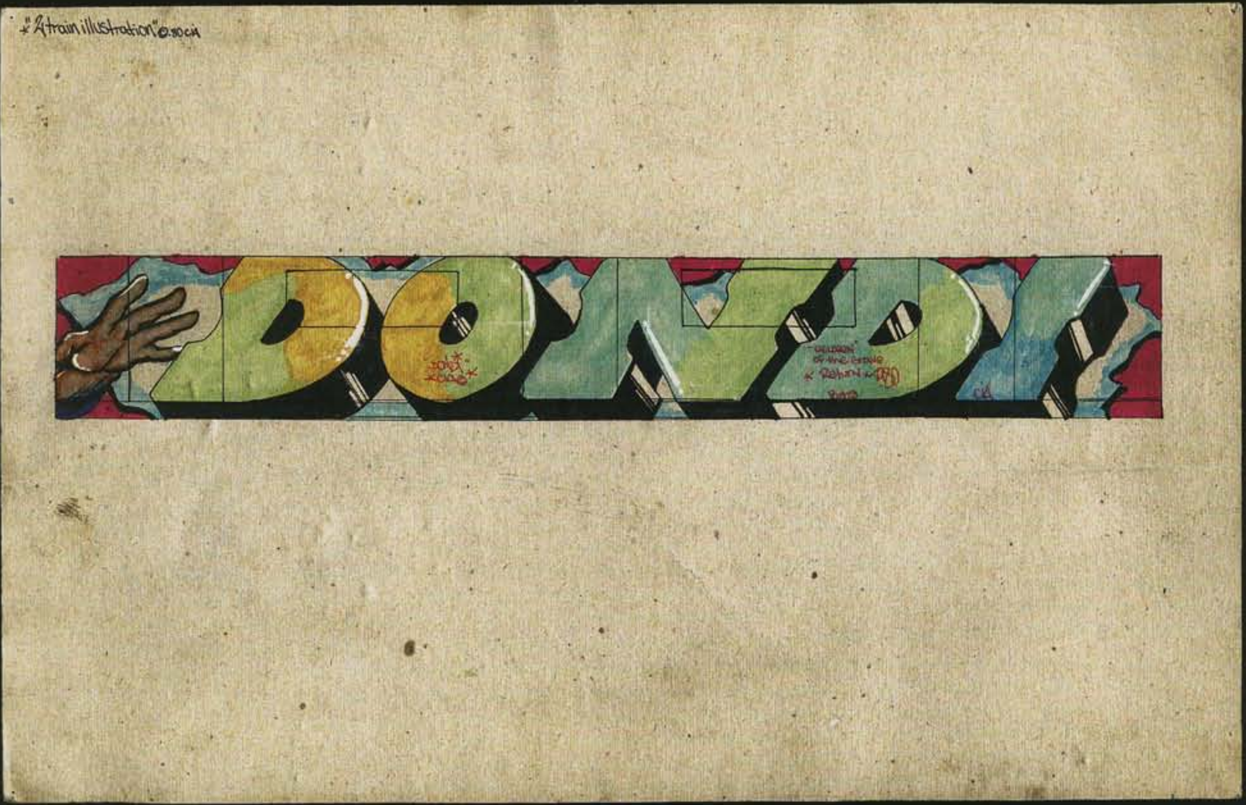

DONDI
LIN: L BLUE 5
SHADOW: BLACK 2
ROPS: RED 3
LOUD: WHITE 2
12: CANS

2

1980

Dondi first used the image of a hand "reaching out" to his name in *Children of the Grave, Part 1*. On the far right side of the car a bony hand with a long nail points toward his name. In *C.O.T.G. Part 2*, the hand appears again, this time fully rendered. The outstretched hand became a recognizable icon in Dondi's work. Whereas the hand depicted on the first car was intended to evoke an eerie mood, the new one—although intended to be reaching from beyond the grave—was generally perceived as a much less ominous image.




*"4 train illustration" ©.80 CIA
DONDI
"Children" of the Grave * Return 1980
CIA

Sketch for Children of the Grave 2 1980
collection of Martha Cooper

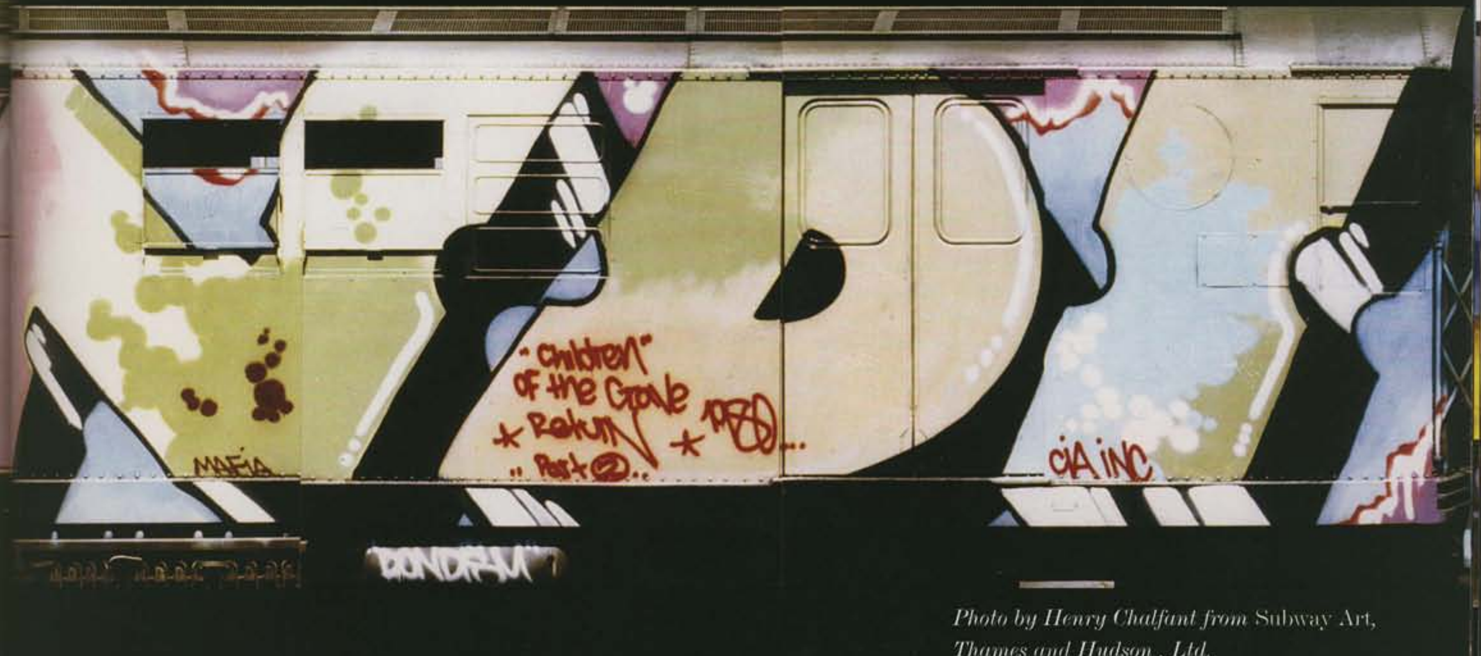
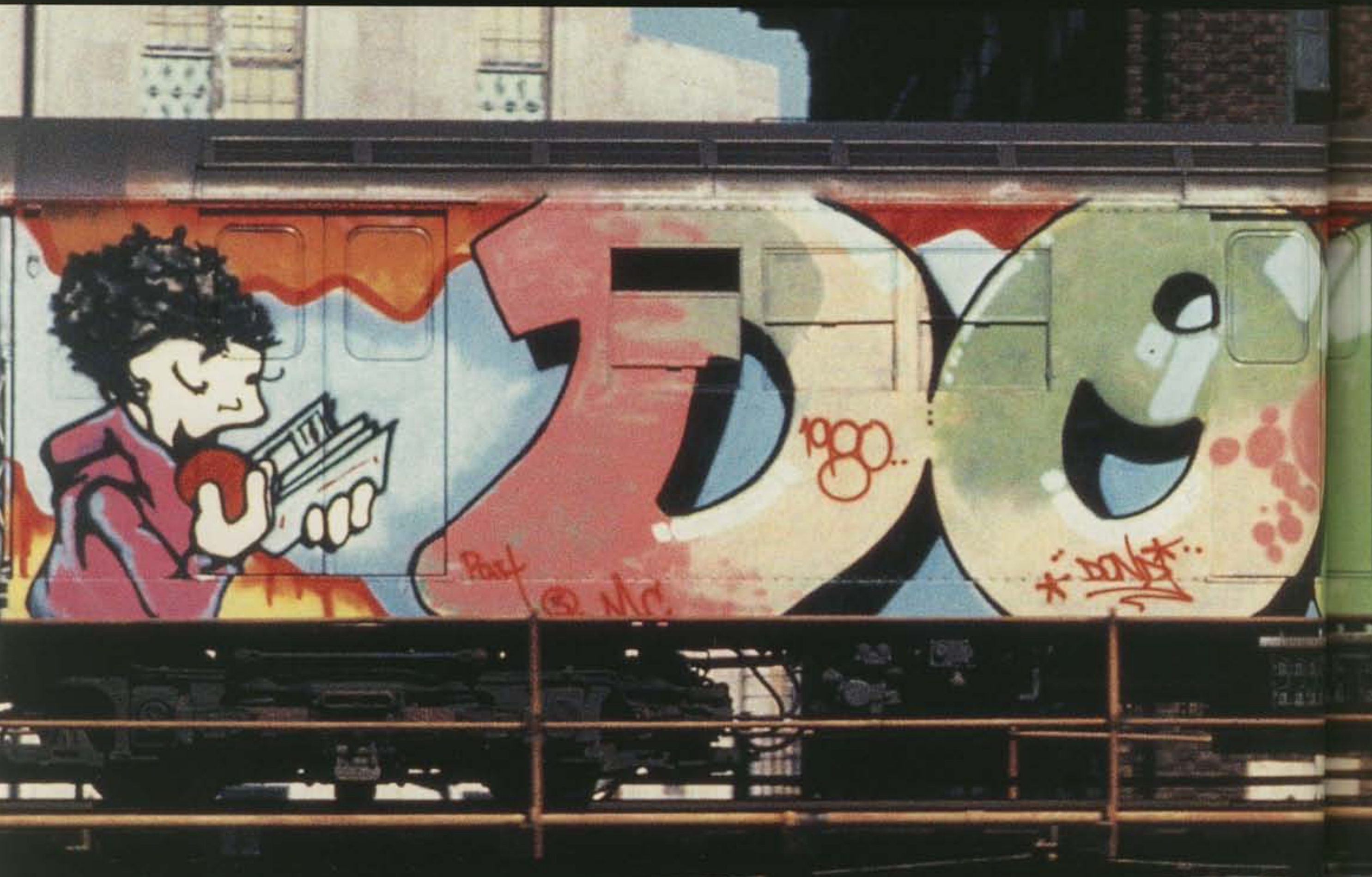
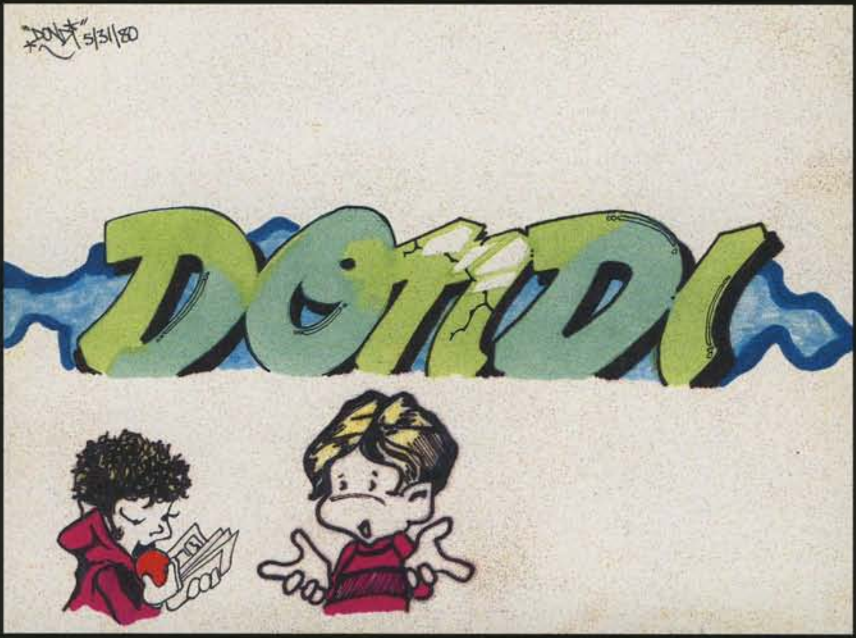

"Children" of the Grave * Return * 1980... " Part ②..
MAFIA
CIA INC
DONDI

Photo by Henry Chalfant from Subway Art, *Thames and Hudson , Ltd.*

3 1980

This car represents the first time that a writer was ever recorded painting a train from start to finish. Dondi seemed inspired by the presence of photographer Martha Cooper during the painting of *Children of the Grave, Part 3*. The two cartoon characters flanking his name are taken from the work of the late Vaughn Bode, whose work was immortalized on trains by countless writers. His son, Mark Bode, was a close personal friend of Dondi's.




DONDI 5/31/80
DONDI

Sketch for Children of the Grave 3

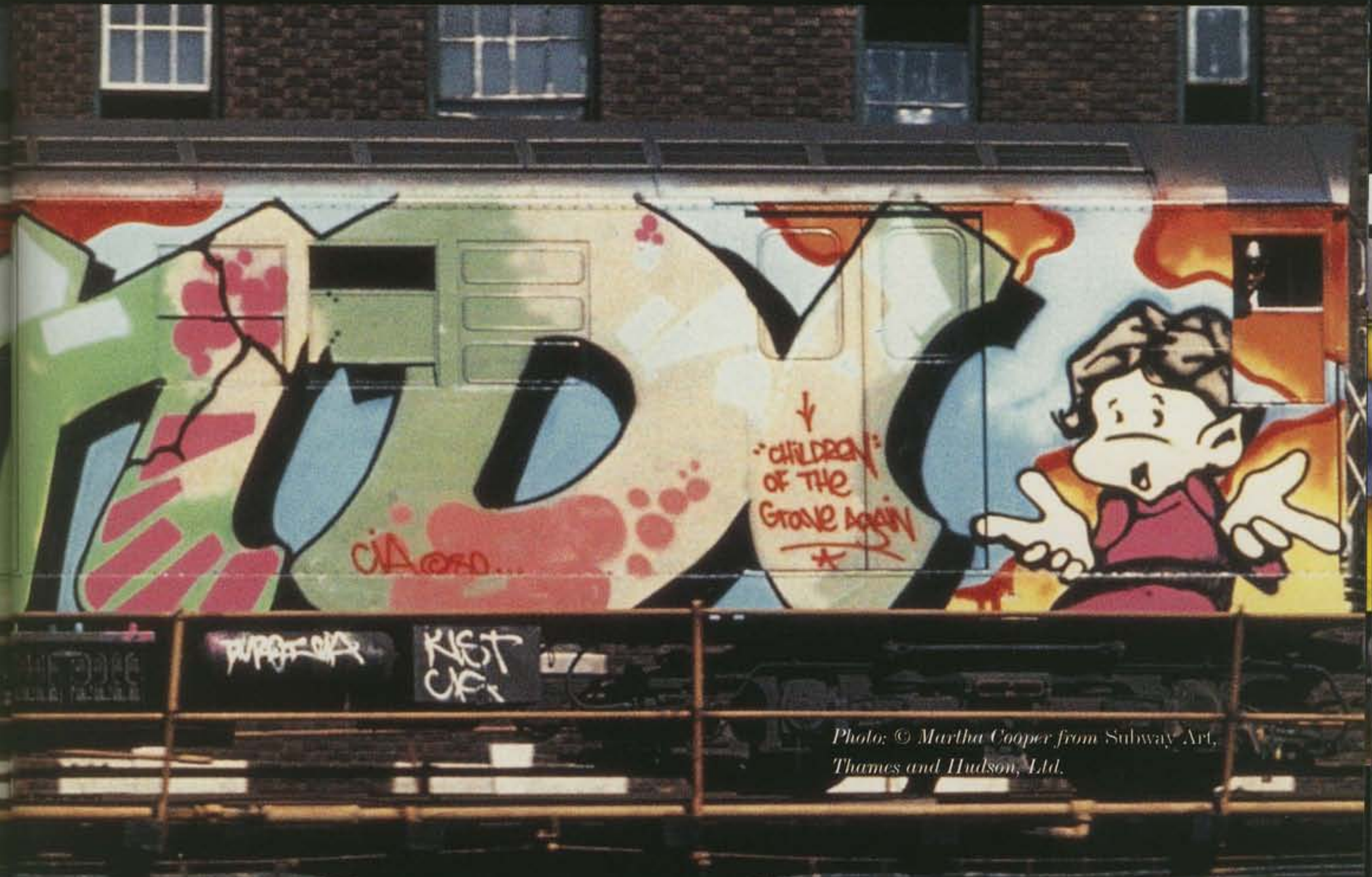
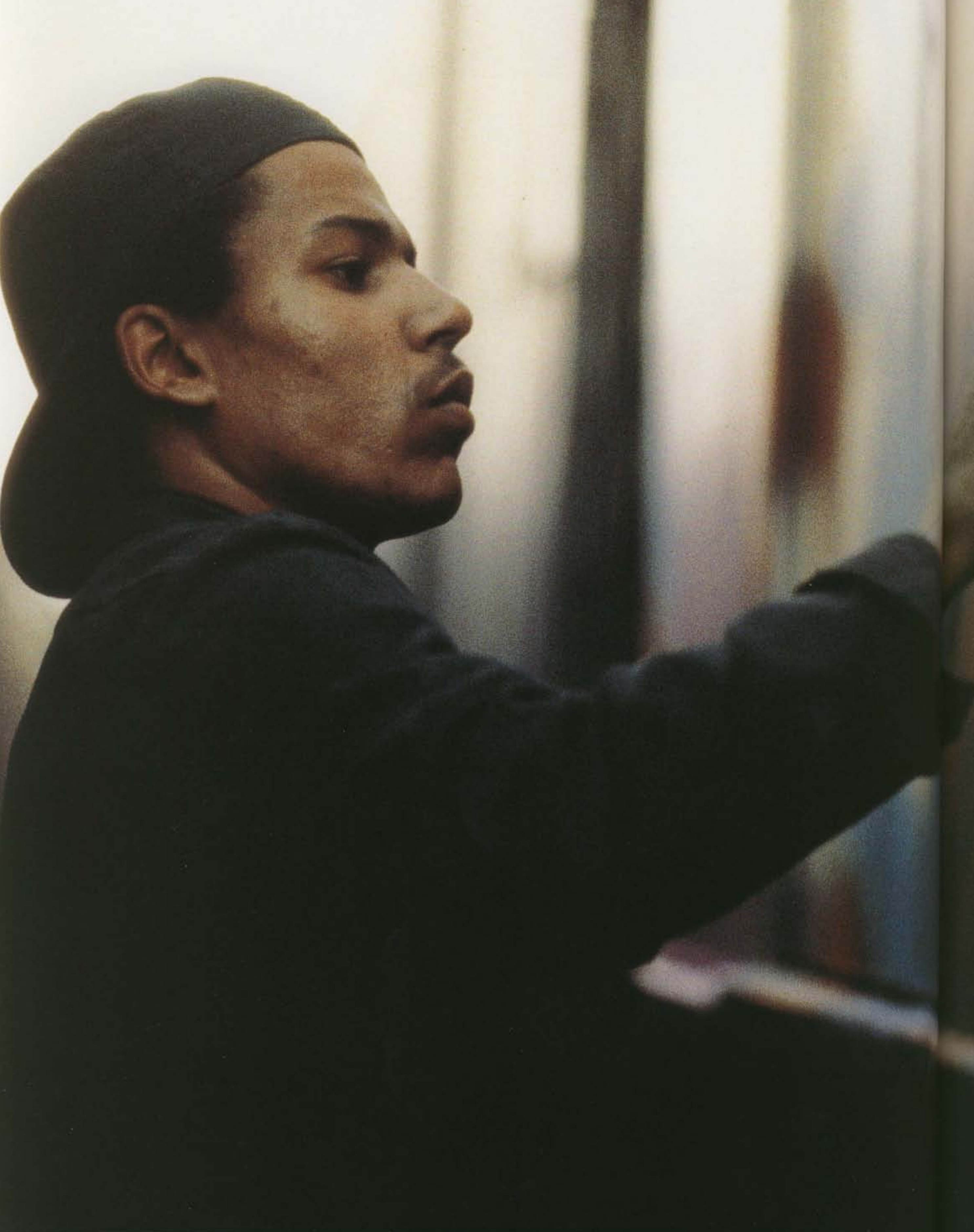
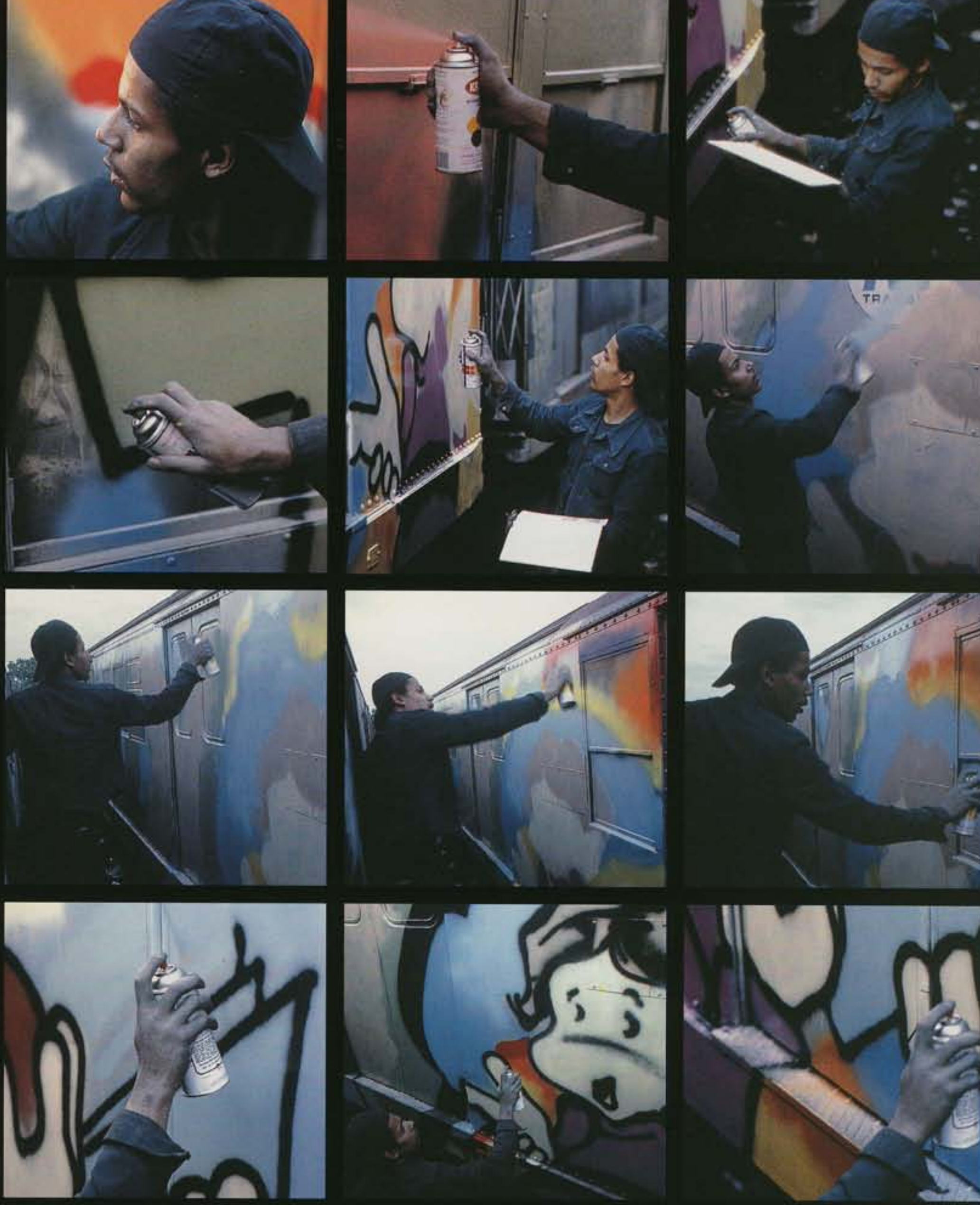

"CHILDREN OF THE GRAVE AGAIN"
CIA

Photo: © Martha Cooper from Subway Art, *Thames and Hudson, Ltd.*





Dondi painting Children of the Grave 3
all photos: © Martha Cooper

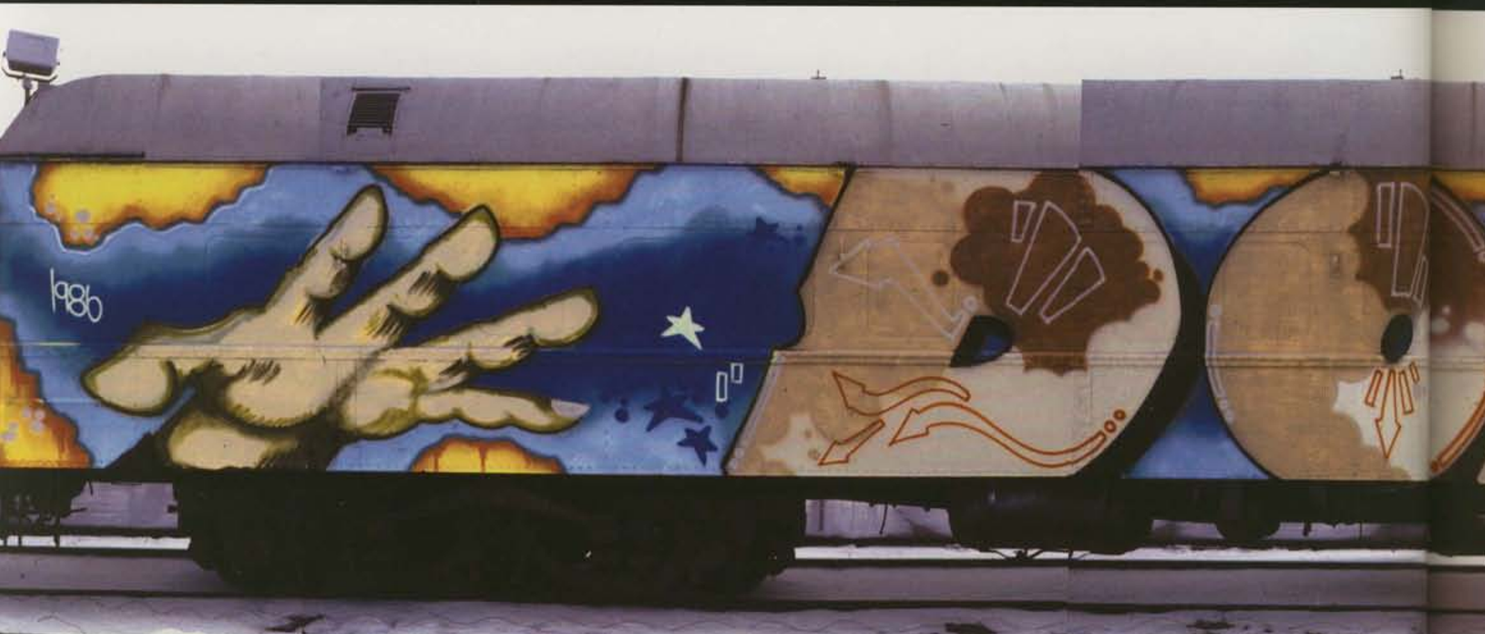
Art Train 1986

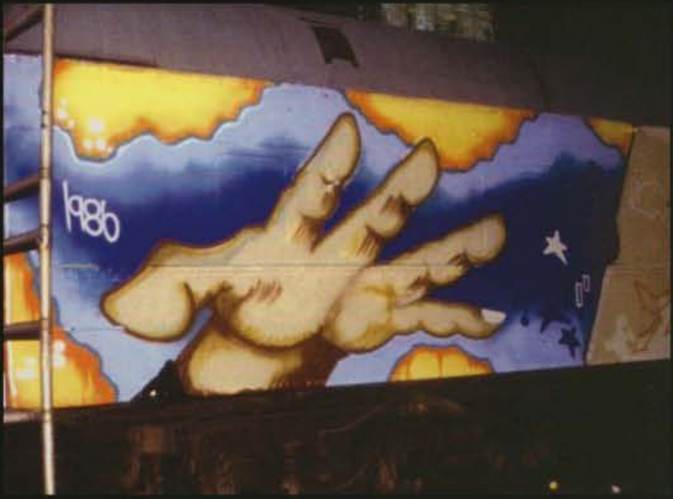
photos: Henry Chalfant

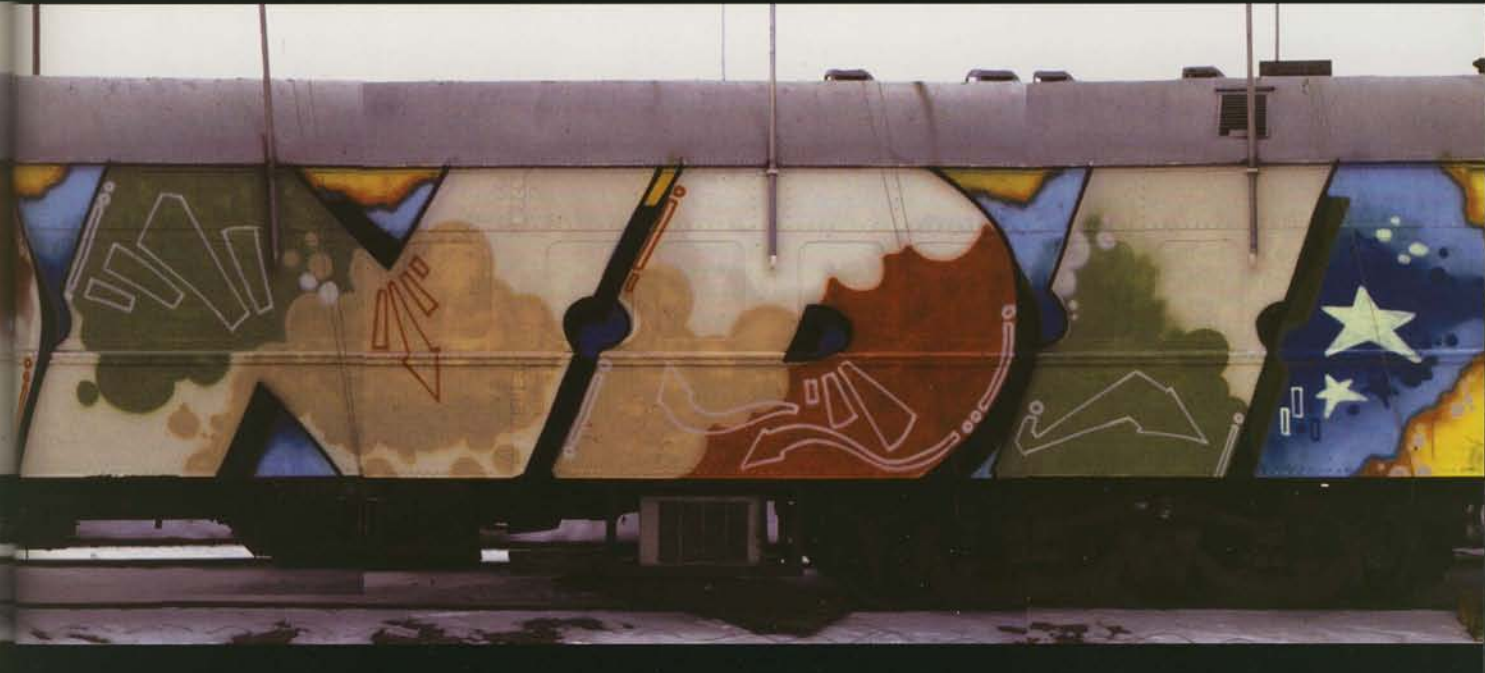
The Art Train project came about through combined efforts by parties in Detroit and New York. In New York, art dealers Dolores Neumann and Joe LaPlaca and photographer Henry Chalfant worked together to recruit the impressive roster of top-notched aerosol talent for the project.

Dondi and the other eleven artists were flown to an Amtrak yard in Port Huron, Michigan, to execute the work. There he rendered this colossal piece reminiscent of his legendary *Children of the Grave, Part 2*.

These photos of Dondi on a scaffold wearing a hardhat seem almost quaint. But his finished product clearly shows that he was able to tap into the same energies that motivated him while painting "unsanctioned" in the subway yards of East New York.



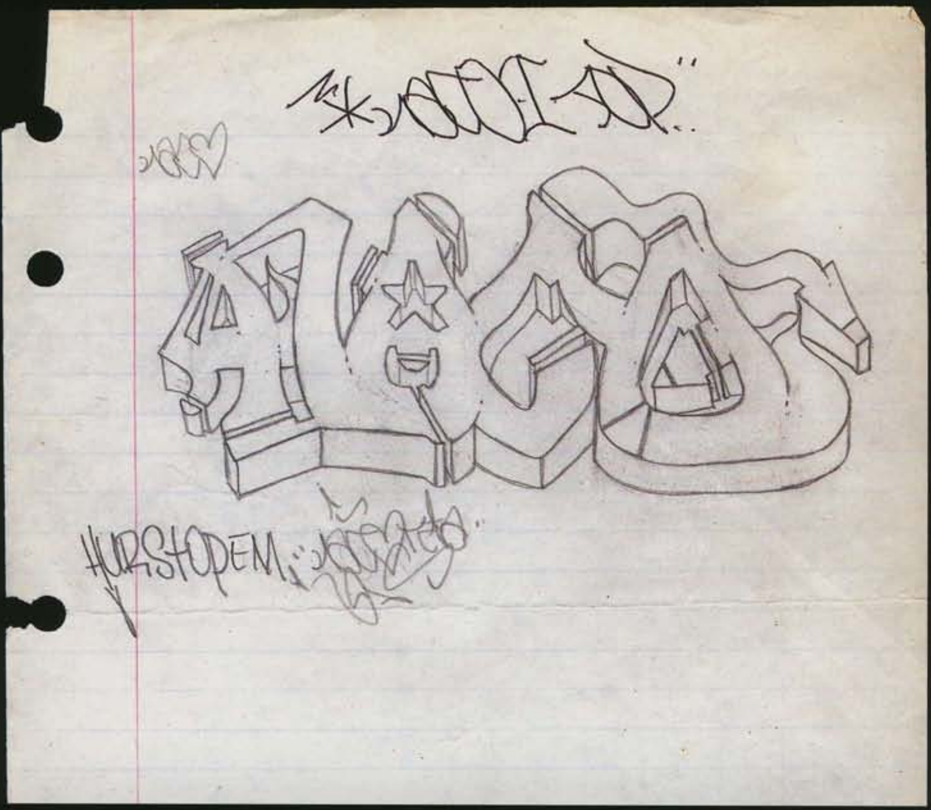

1986



Naco 1978

Zephyr:
A very early NACO piece with a nice 3-D coming straight down. Lots of original Red Devil paint here. Note the Hurst tag on the outline.

Duro:
This is semi–wild style. This shows how meticulous Dondi was in the outlines of his letters. He was experimenting with the connects.

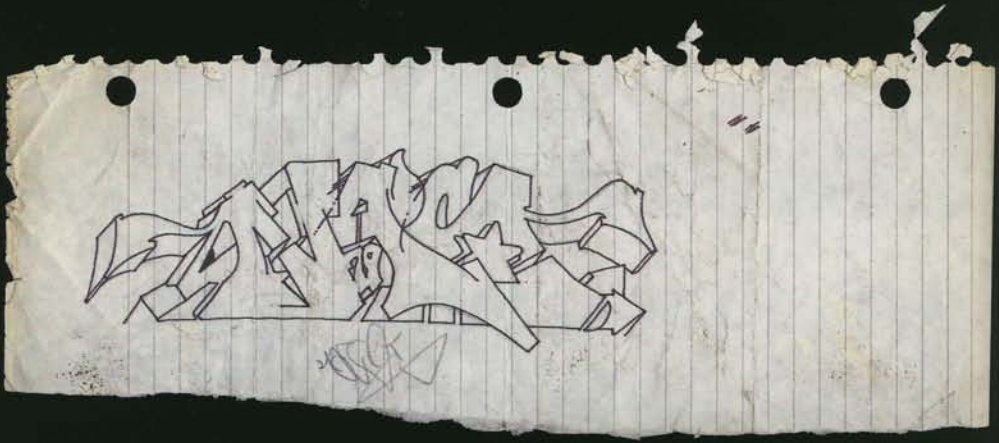


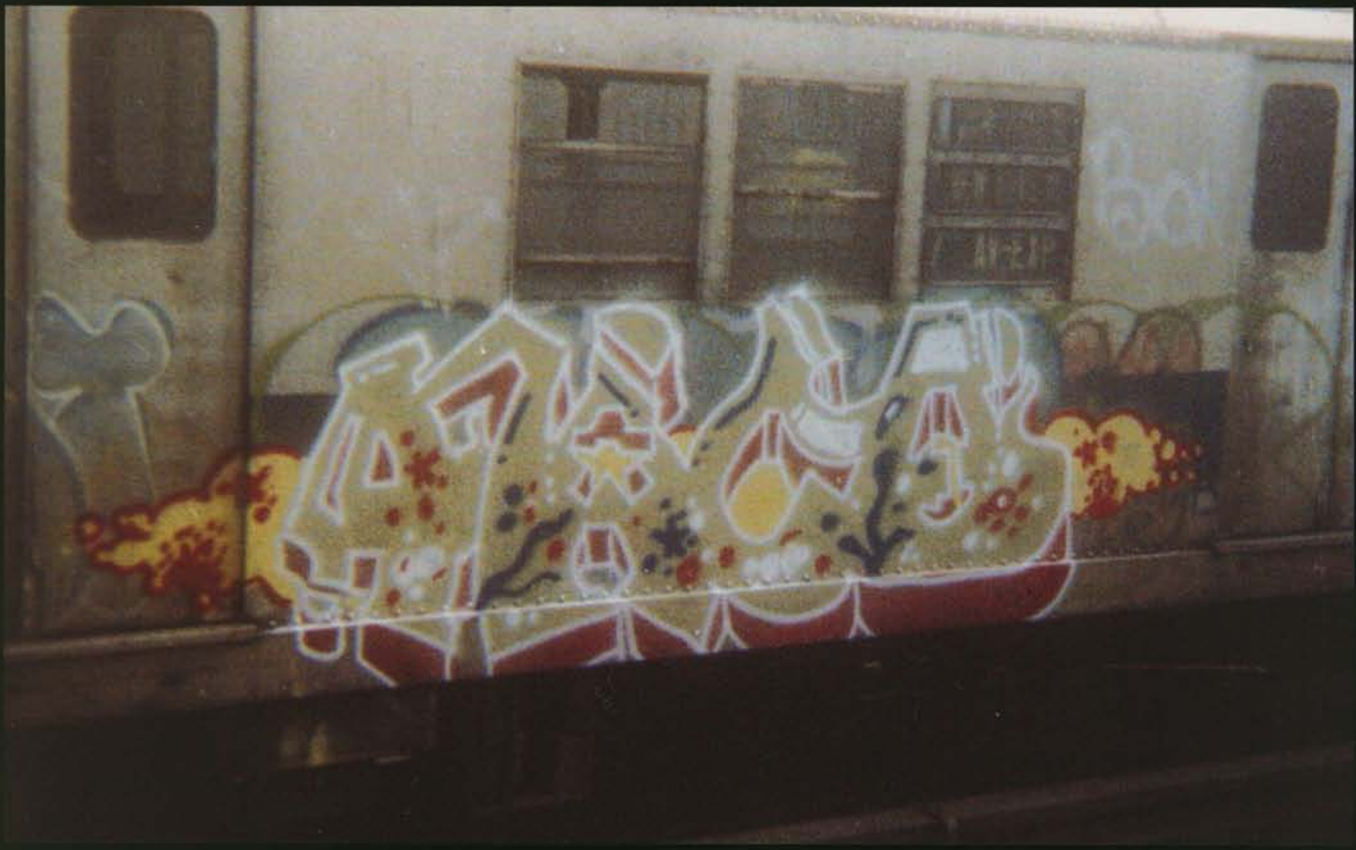
Naco 1979

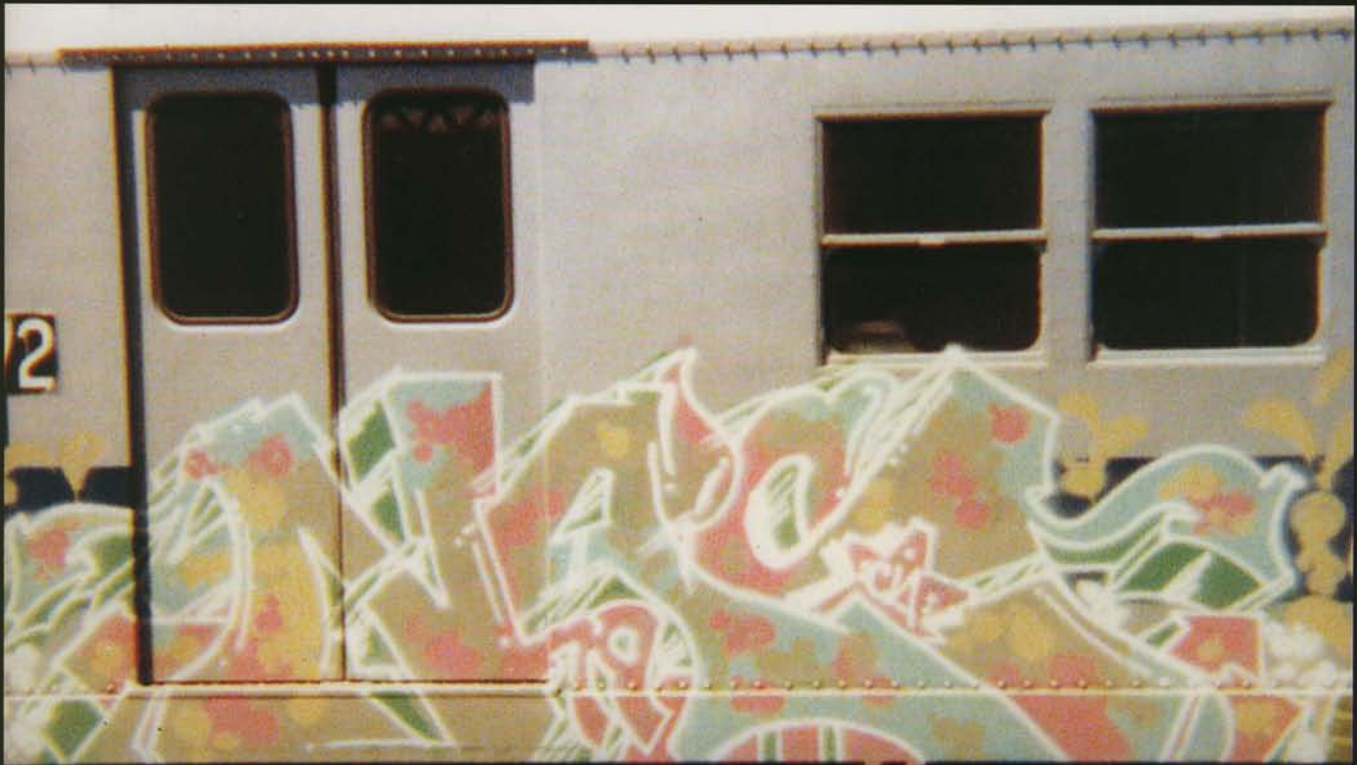
Naco + Kel + Dive
Dondi (Naco), Kel, Repel (Dive)

Kel:
Dondi did all the outlines. They were all comparable. This was in the No. 2 Yard. I remember Repel hated his piece.

Zephyr:
The white outline with the pastel fill-in is advanced, even by today's standards. I love the little "79" squeezed into the "A."







White 1978

Swiss + White + Duro

Kel (Swiss), Dondi (White), Duro

Kel:

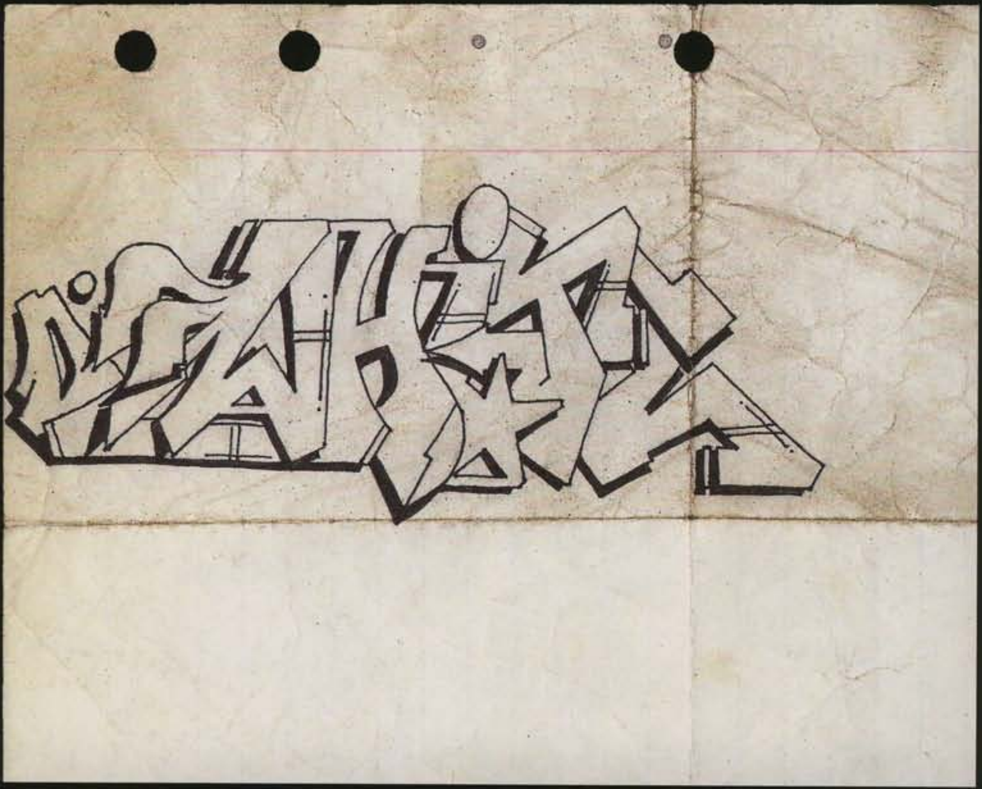
This was one in a series of cars by CIA at a time when we were having a "race" with some writers from LL's, Saro and Kado. Soon after this, we had beef with TMT.

Duro:

This was the week that we first met Martha. This whole car came right after the DONDI LOVES LUCY on the BMTs, which was the first time I wrote DURO. This was the second.

Zephyr:

Note that on the outline he planned to do a D.WHITE but changed it on the car.



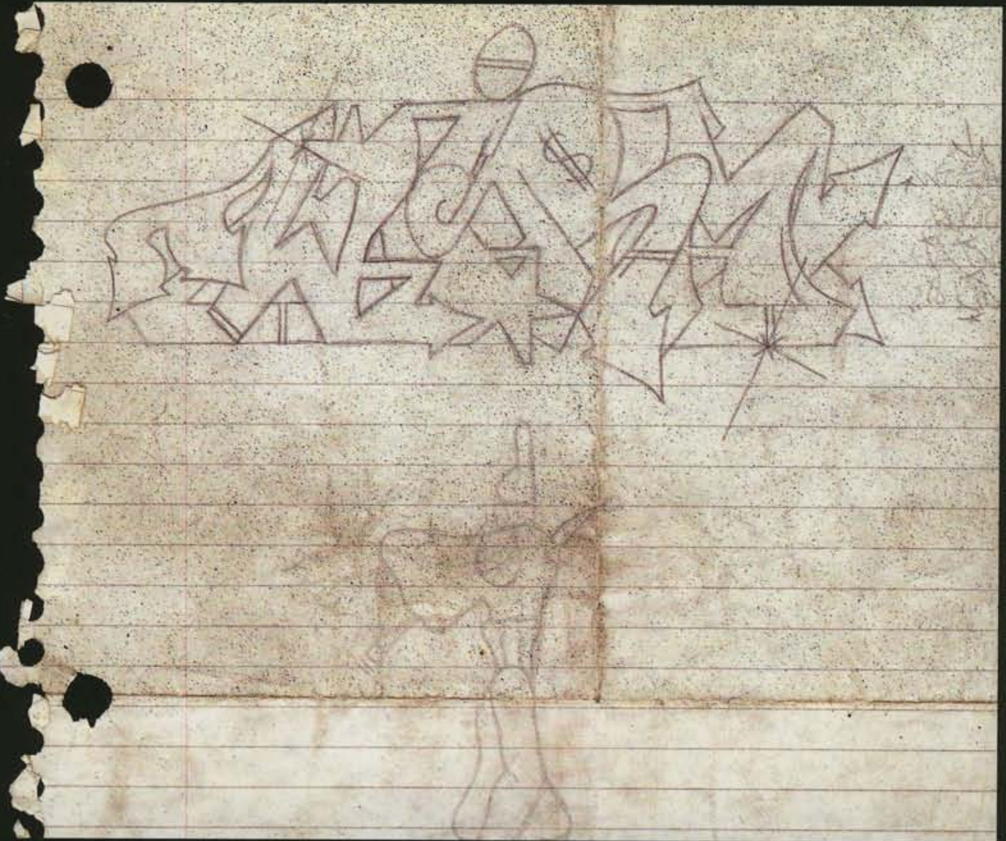
Wirm 1978

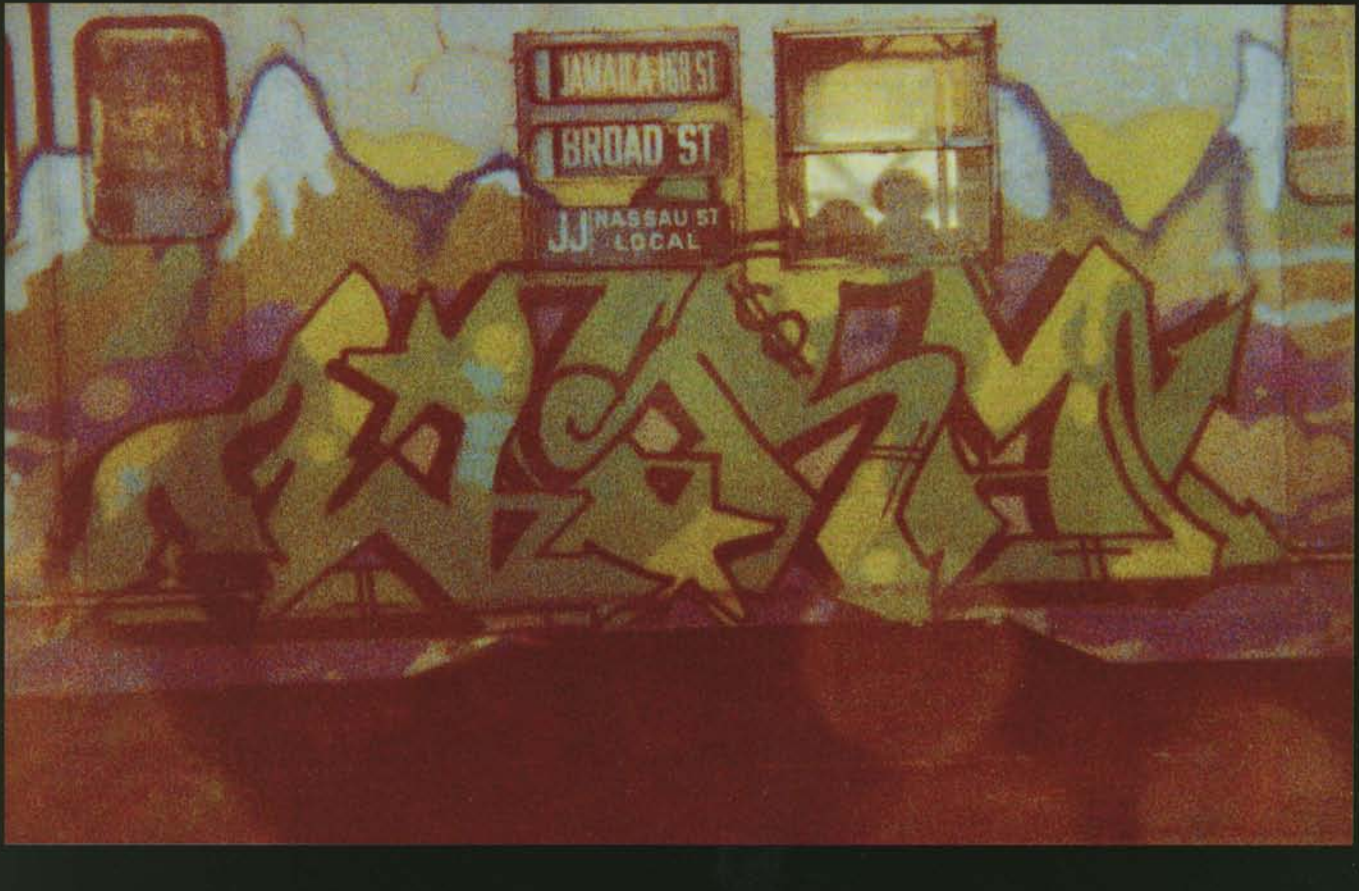
Welch + Wink + Wirm

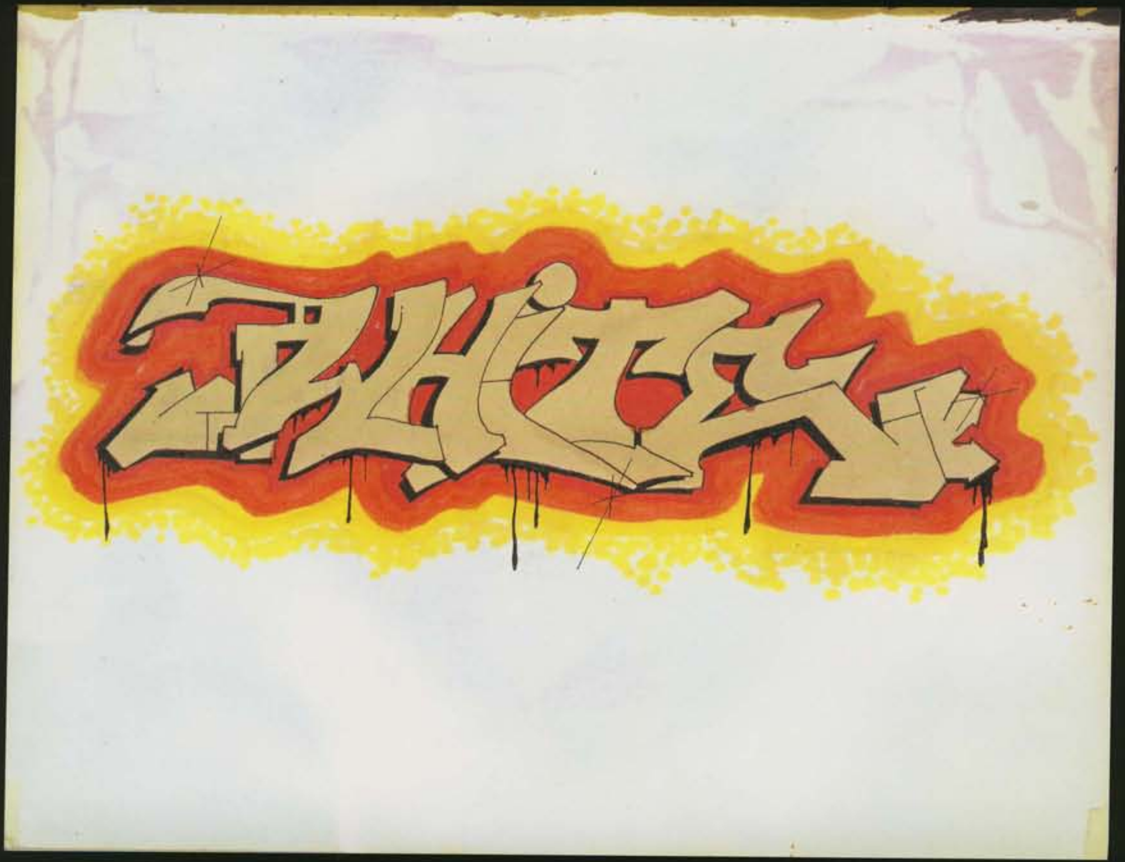
Kel (Welch), Duro (Wink), Dondi (Wirm)

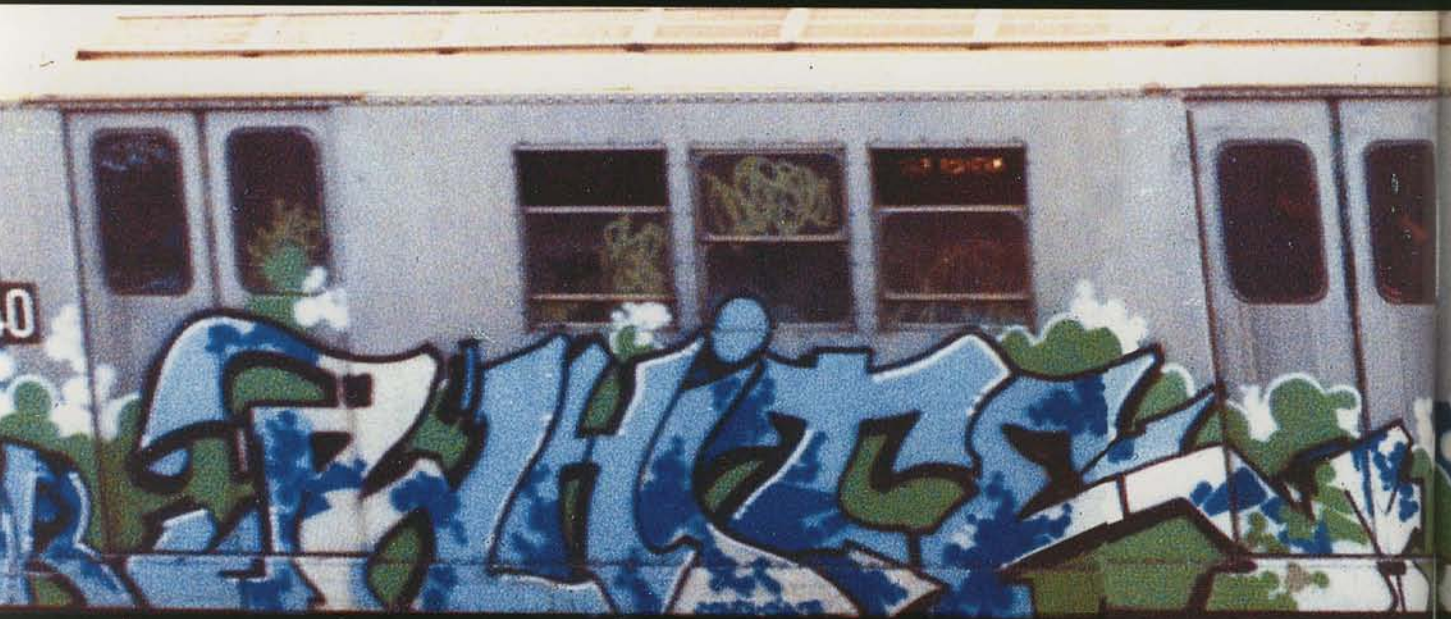
Kel:

This was part of the whole "W" thing. Noc and Chain had a battle going on for the name "Word." This was our answer to TMT's whole car 2 MUCH + BOND on the No. 2 train.




JAMAICA 168 ST
BROAD ST
JJ NASSAU ST LOCAL

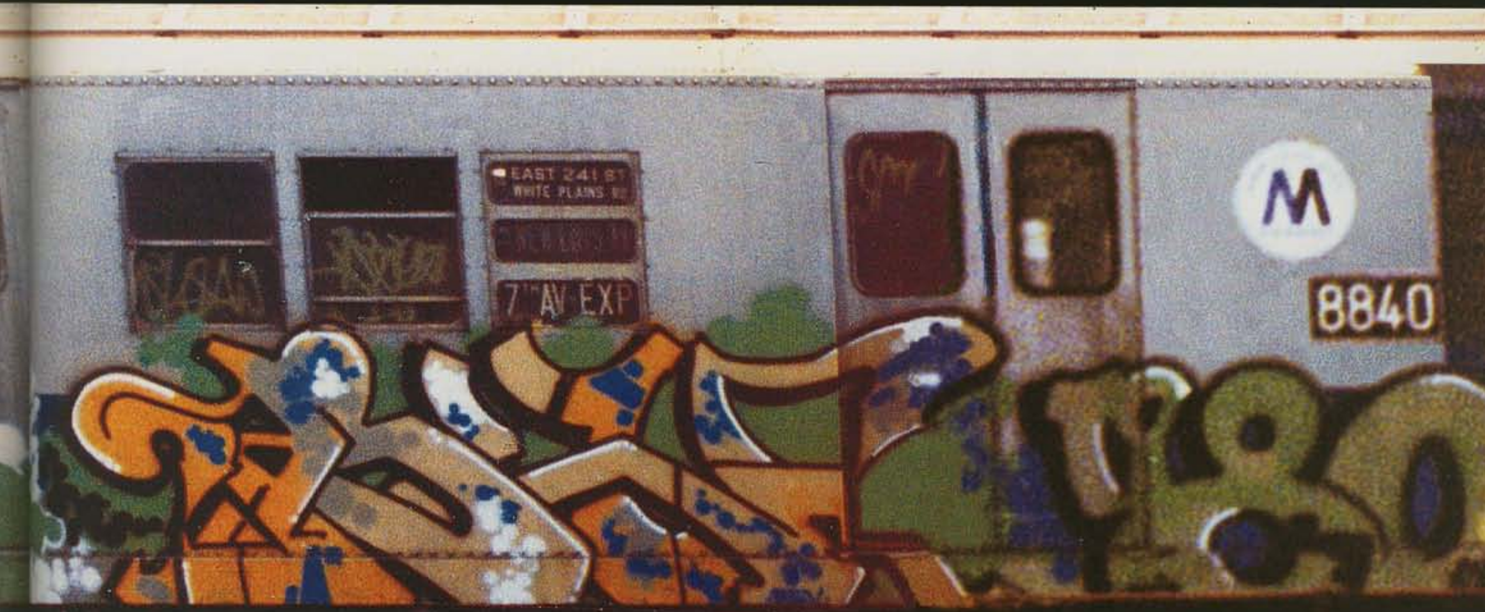




Mr. White + Bev 1980

Kel:
In graffiti there were times when different letters were in vogue, like tags that ended in "E." This piece came about after Chain and Part did the WORD + WORM piece. So Dondi wanted to do a "W" piece as well, and since White was his last name, that's what he did.

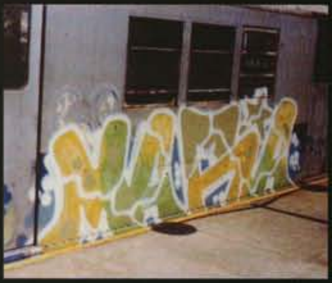
Zephyr:
This is a perfect example of a wild-style graffiti master at his best. When Rasta and I saw this car we nearly crapped ourselves. Sometime during 1979 Dondi's style really clicked. After that he was absolutely untouchable. It's no wonder that he chose the number "79" to go with his tag. 1979 was definitely his year.

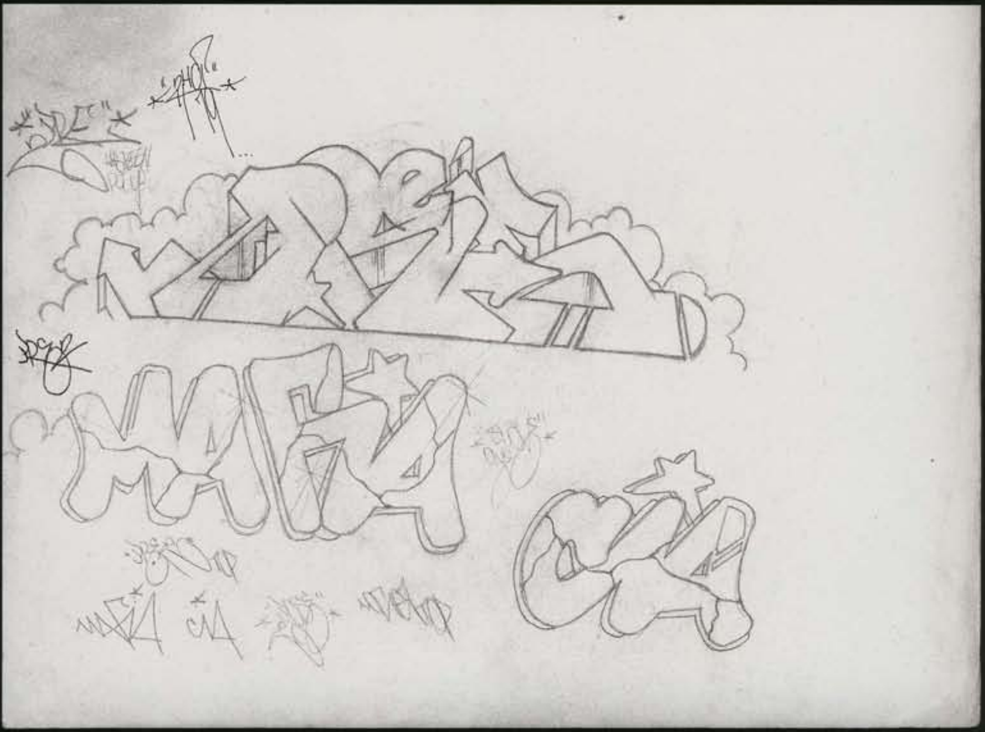


Pre 1979

Pre MAFIA

Zephyr:
I like the little extra "E." I have to admit, I've bitten that one a few times—but everybody bit this from Noc.



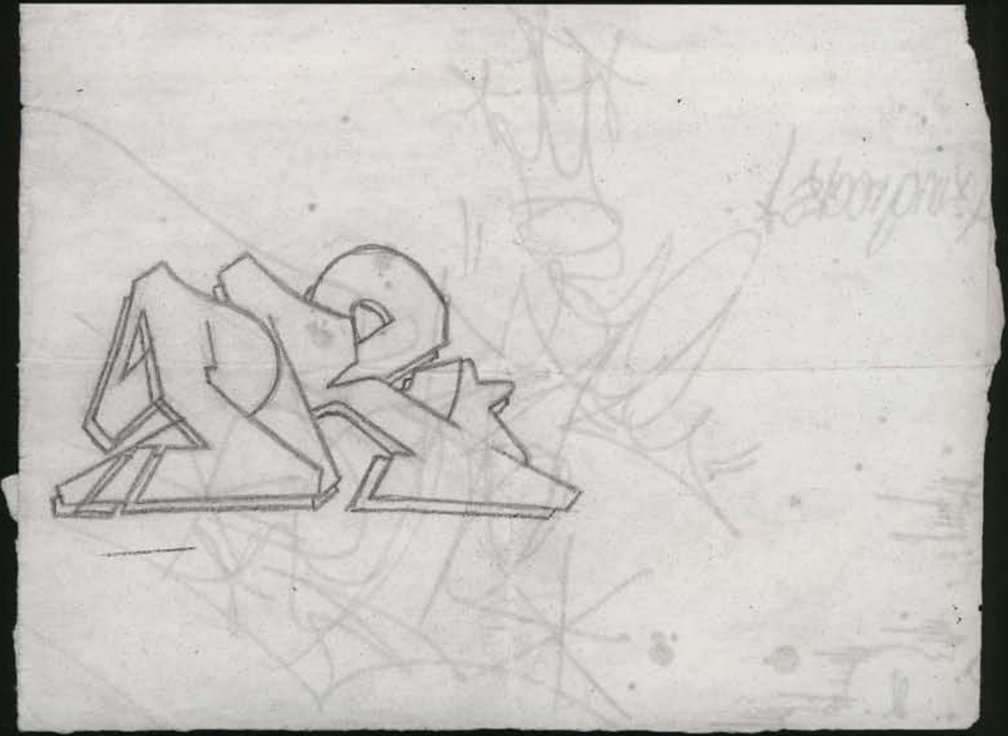


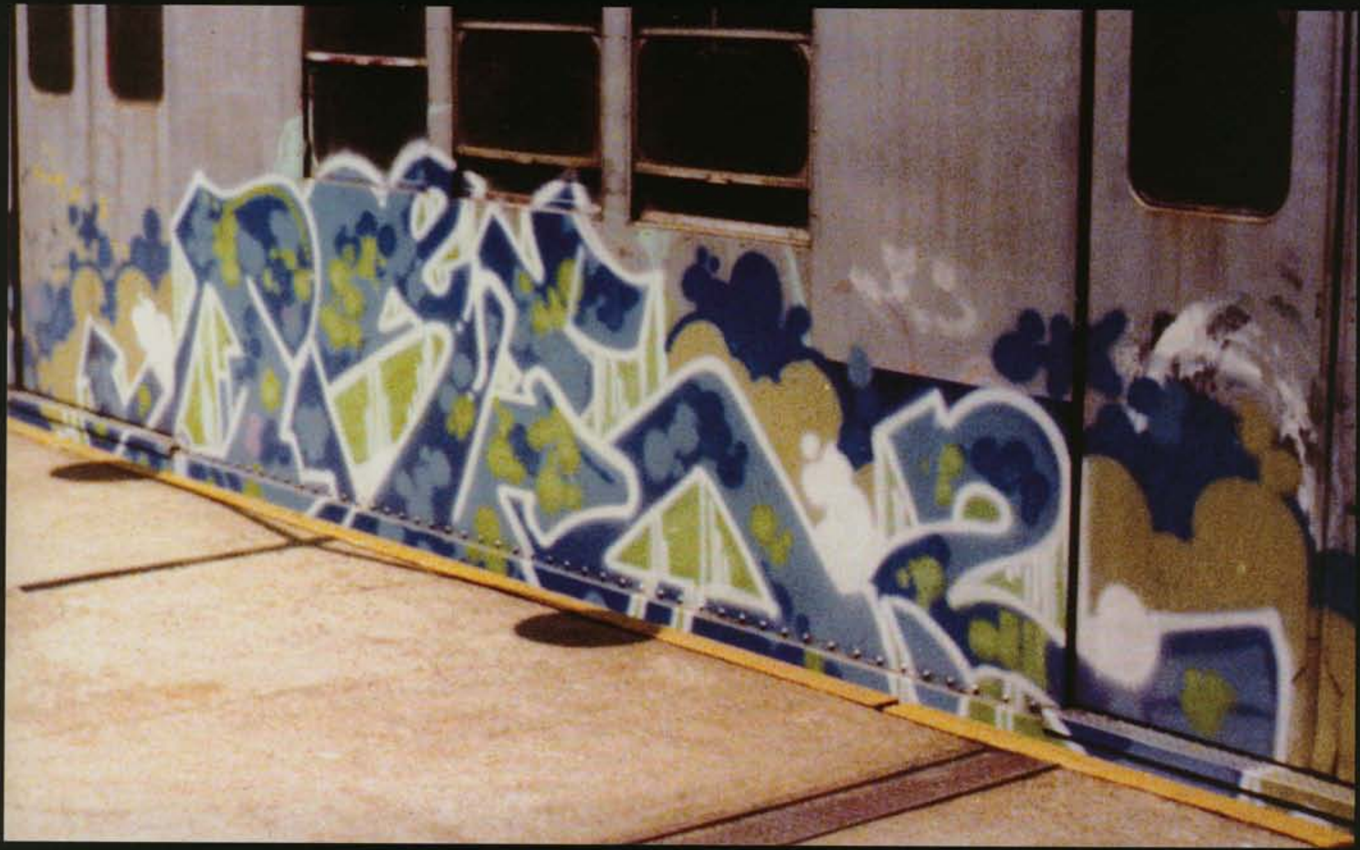
Pre 1979

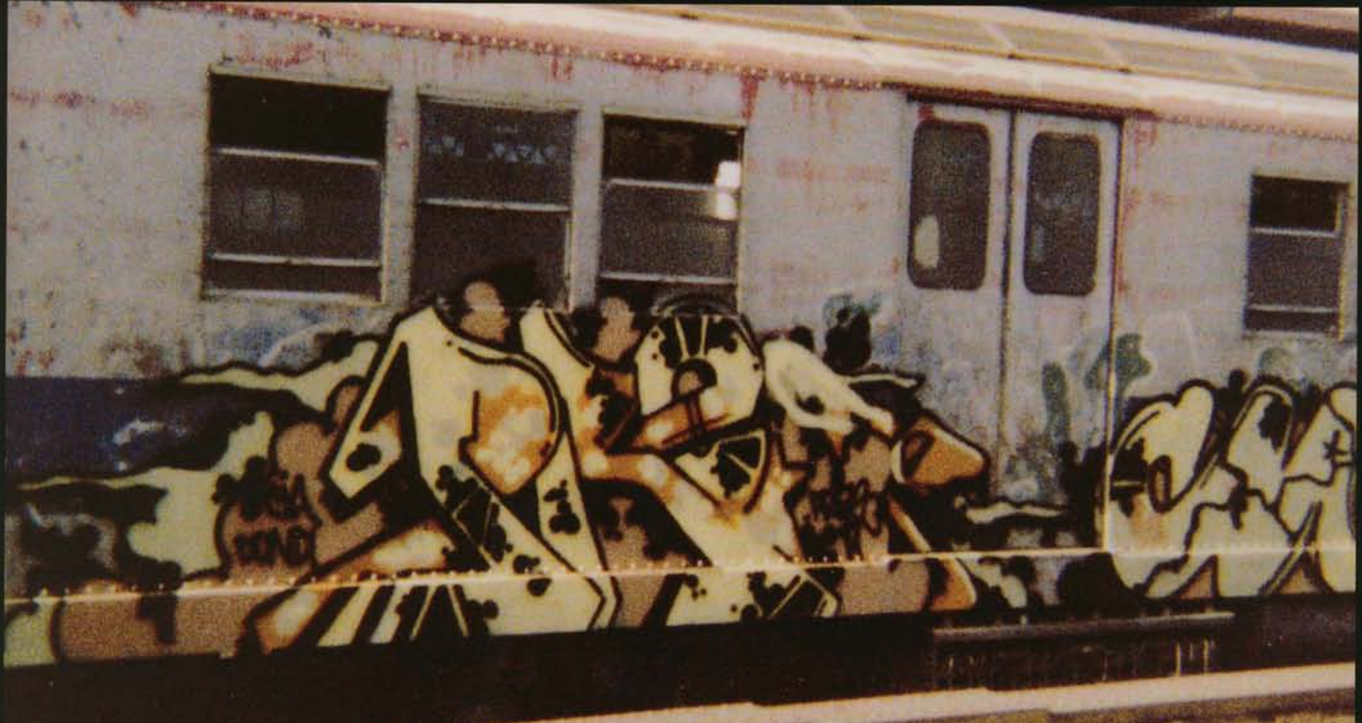
Pre CIA

Kel:
Dondi bragged that he had done this with only three cans of paint. I just laughed at him and asked what that splotch was. He said it was the "wing of the bee." Whatever.

Duro:
Dondi did this by himself. He had quit, and me and Kel kept on doing whole cars. We went to his house and he said he had gone to the yards. He did a Roll Up (see p. 80) piece that week, by himself, as well.





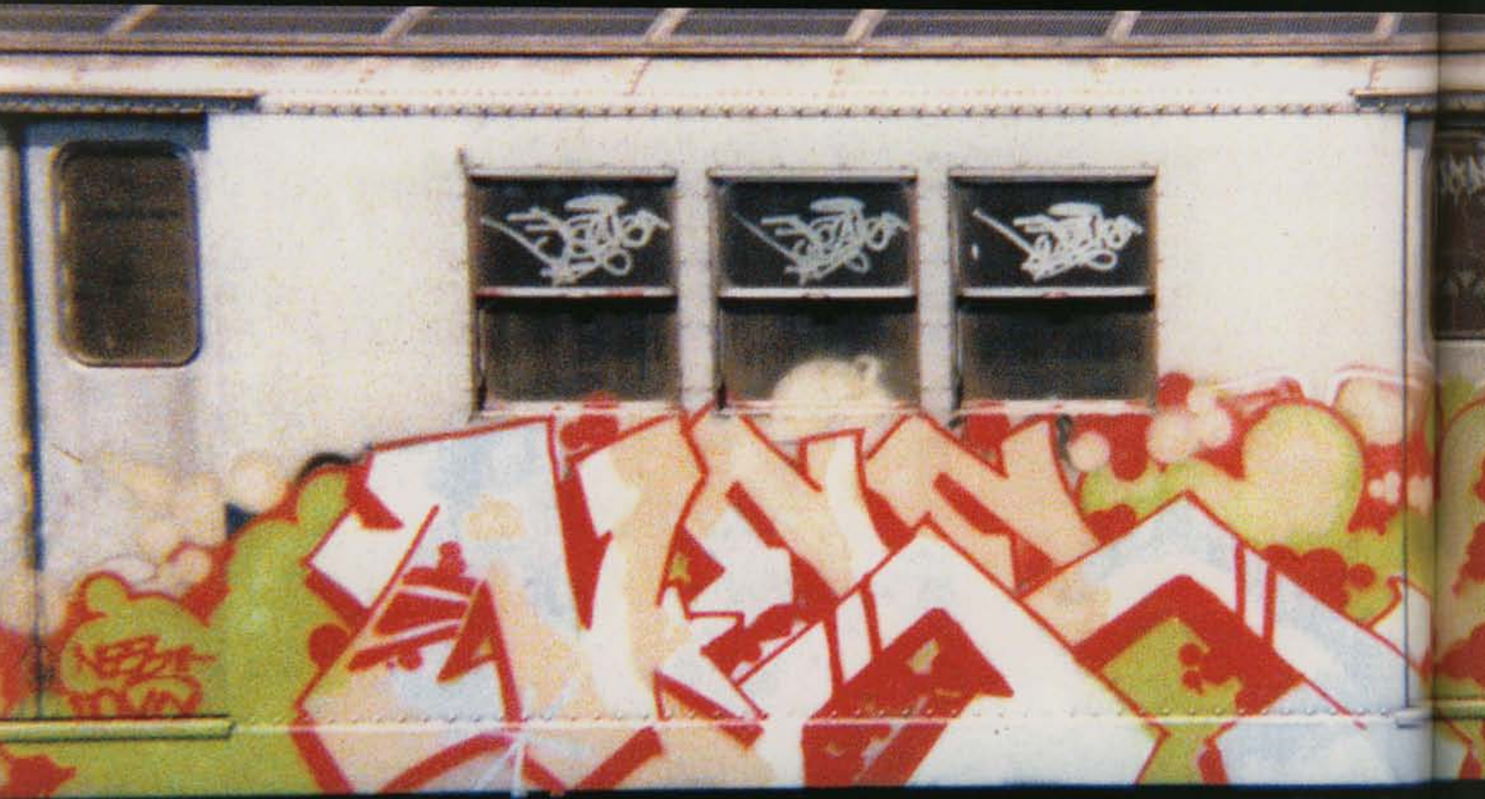


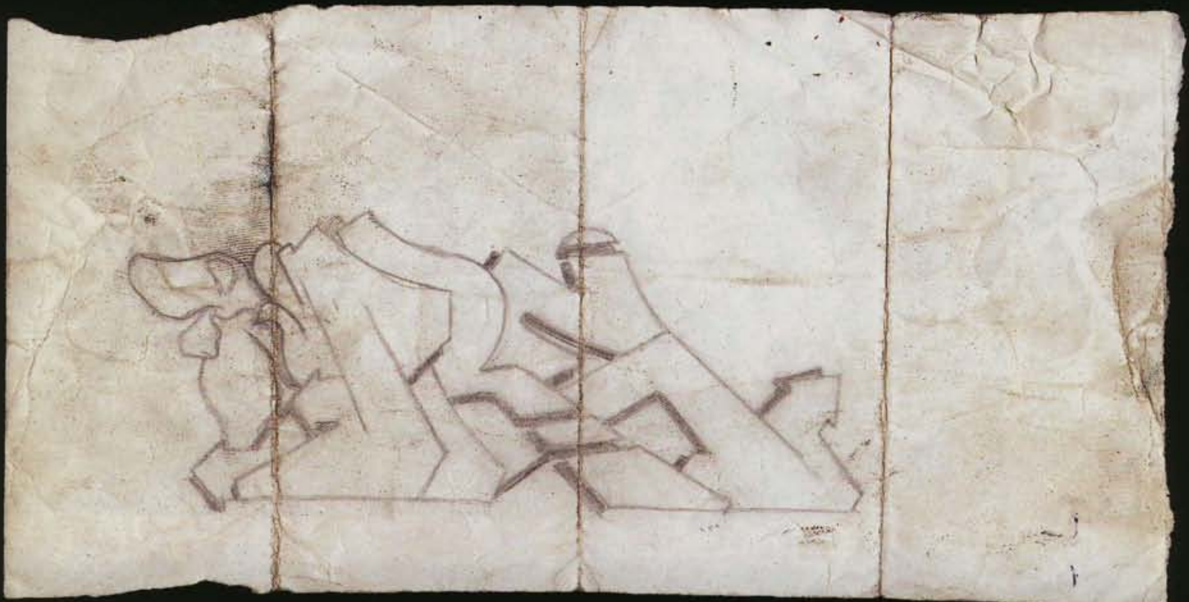
Nee + Pre 1980

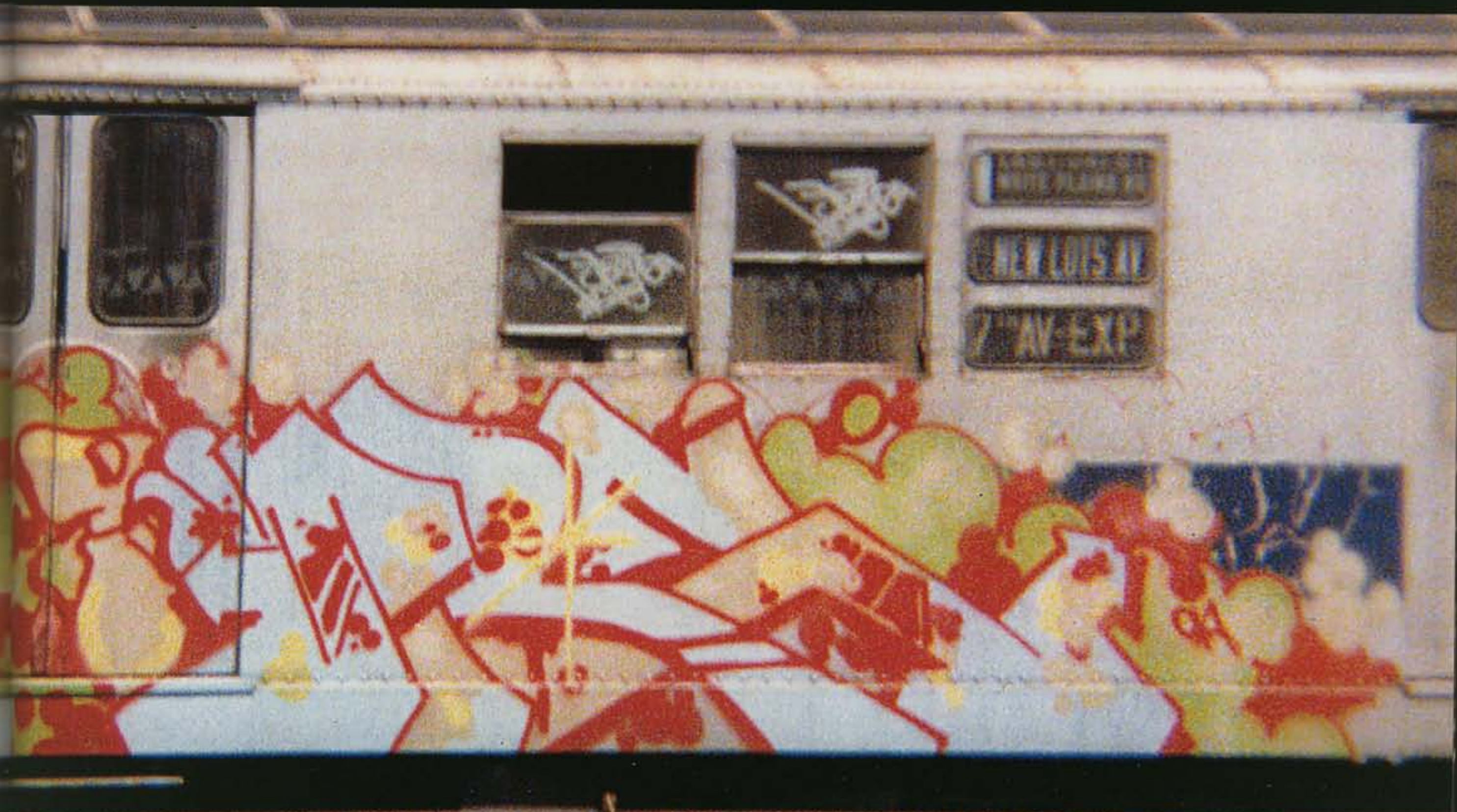
Nee, Dondi (Pre)

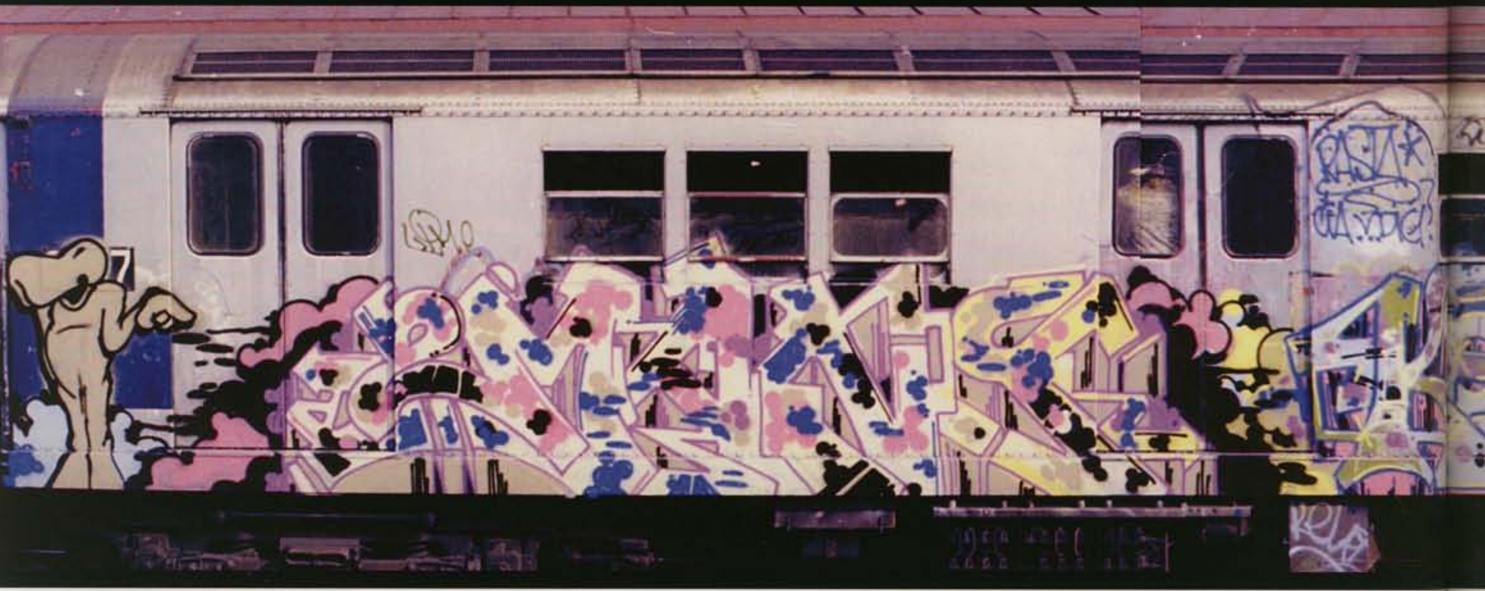
Duro:
Soon after Dondi did this, me, Dondi, and Kid 56 were in the New Lots Yard, and someone showed up, scaring us. From under the train, we could see it was Nee. He tried to leave the yard with our paint. Dondi grabbed him, I punched him, and Kid 56 grabbed the paint and hit him with a can.

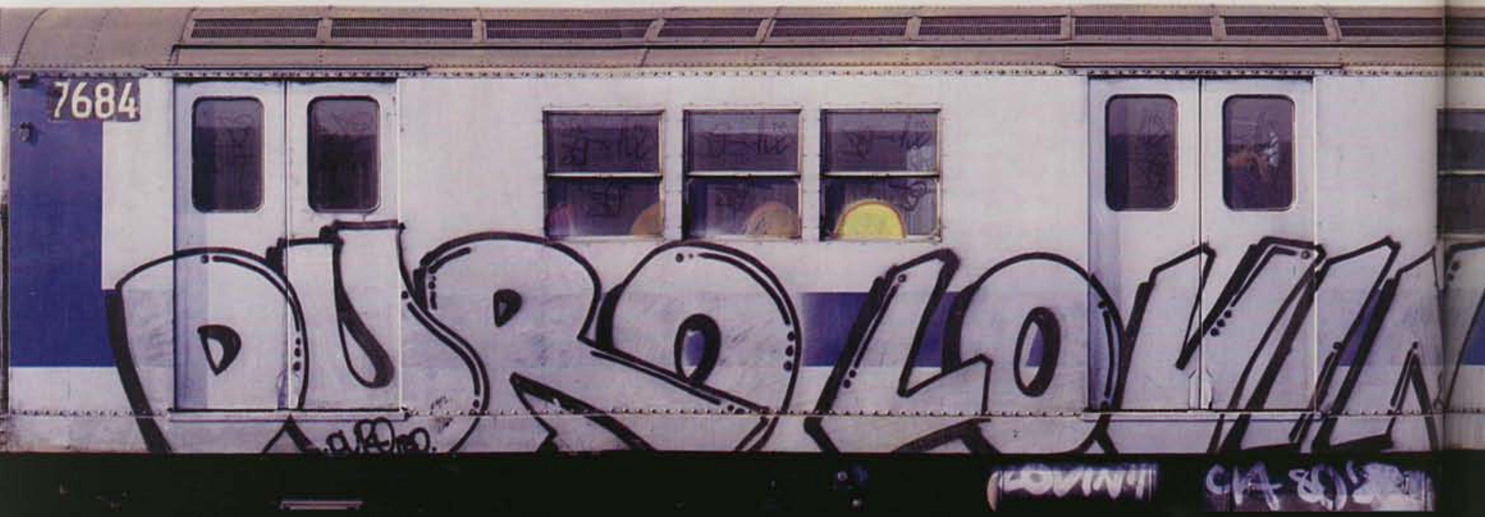
Kel:
I remember calling Nee's card on this because he was bragging. And I told him that Dondi had done the outline and he painted. Nee *maybe* filled it in, but he was basically a look-out.






NEW LOTS AV
7 AV-EXP

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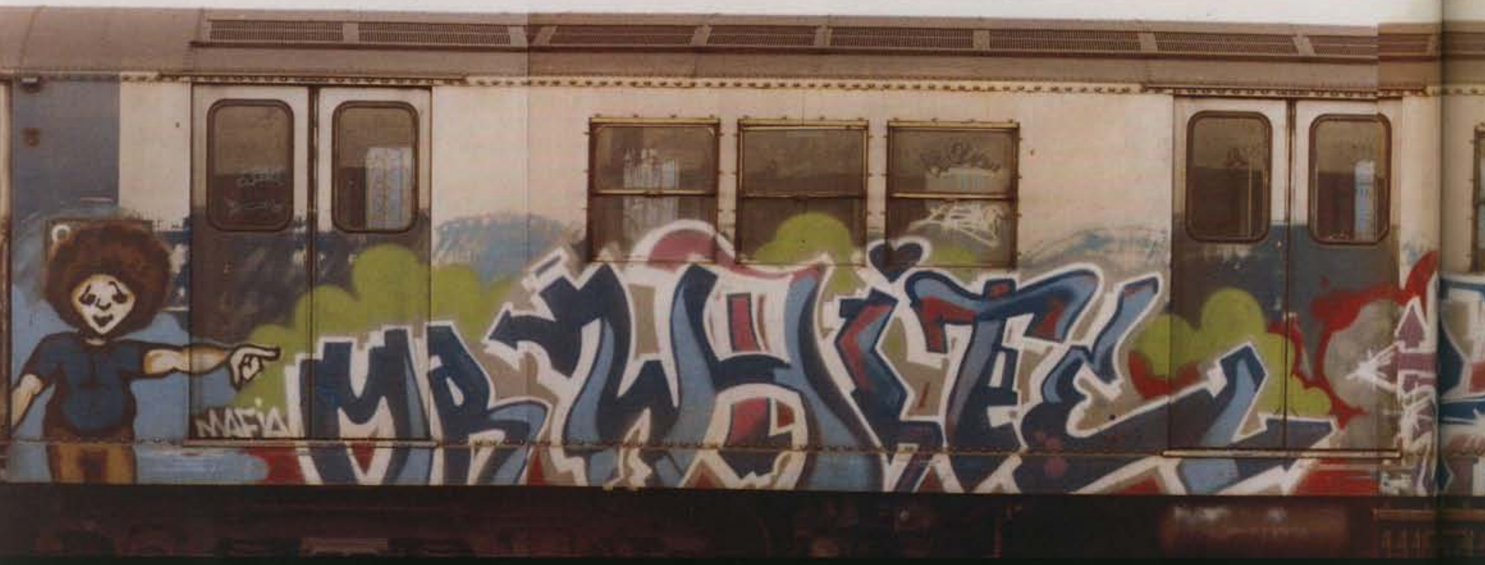
LOVIN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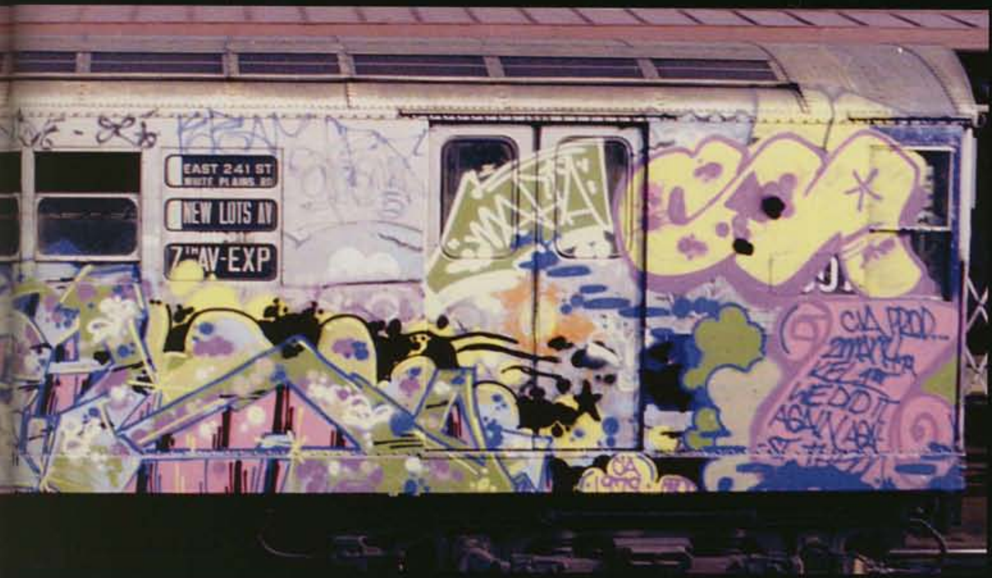
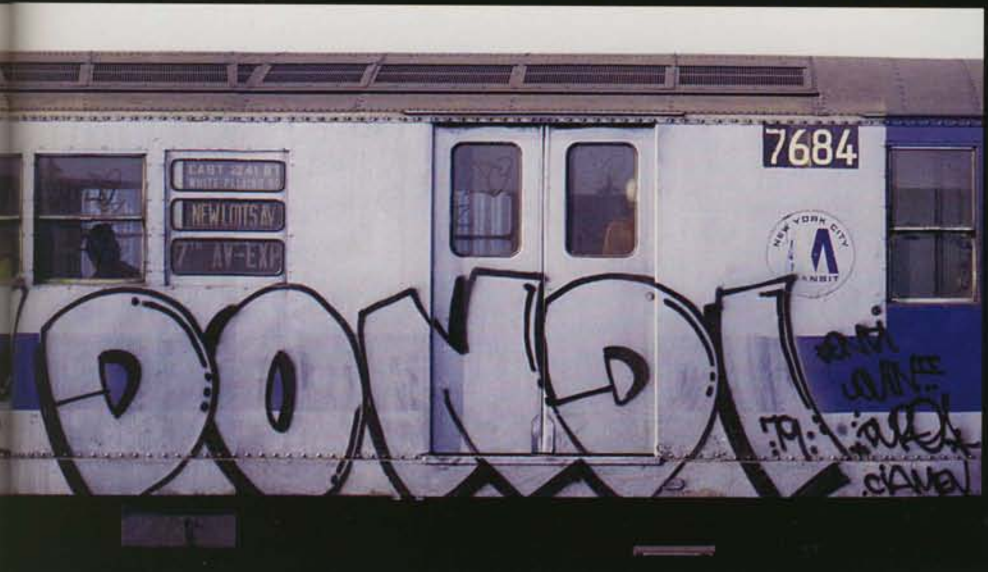

EAST 241 ST
WHITE PLAINS RD
NEW LOTS AV
7TH AV-EXP

2 Many + Kel 1979
Dondi (2 Many), Kel
photo: Henry Chalfant

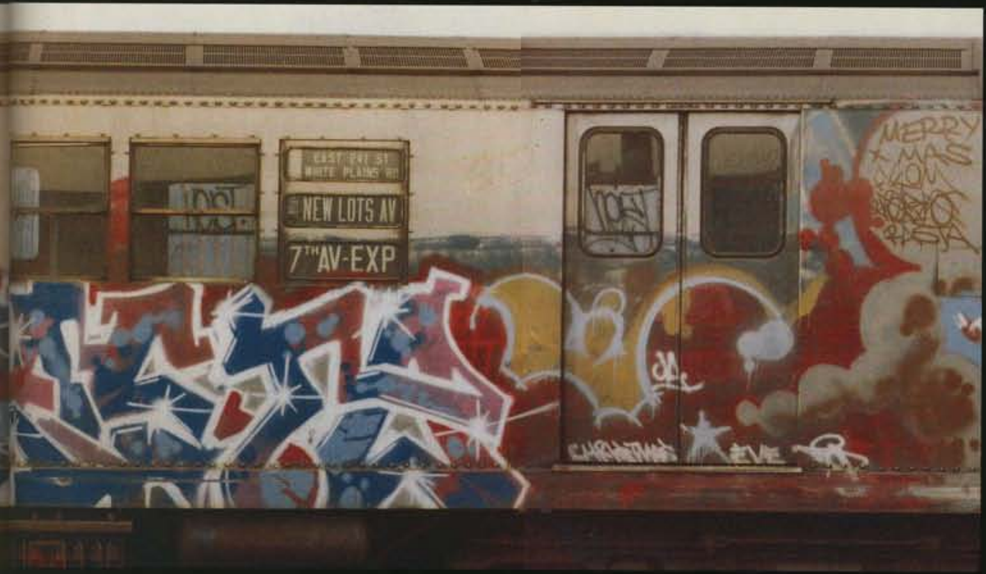
Kel:
This was another response to the TMT crew's 2 MUCH + BOND piece, which was phenomenal. I felt we really didn't put a dent in it.

Doc:
I like the N and the Y because the Y almost looks like an X. This piece was designed moving. Even when the train was standing still the piece was flying.


7684
EAST 241 ST
WHITE PLAINS RD
NEW LOTS AV
7TH AV-EXP
NEW YORK CITY TRANSIT
DONDI
'79

Duro + Lovin + Dondi 1979
photo: Henry Chalfant

Duro:
When we saw the photos of this, we were like "What!? Duro lovin Dondi?" Aeron had done the LOVIN piece, and after this photo, he became Aeron. We had a lot of fun over this car for years.


EAST 241 ST
WHITE PLAINS RD
NEW LOTS AV
7TH AV-EXP
MERRY X-MAS

Mr. White + Rasta 1980
photo: Henry Chalfant

Daze:
When Dondi joined the Soul Artists, he was really impressed with Rasta's style and Rasta was impressed by Dondi's mechanical letters. This was yet another example of Dondi taking a young writer under his wing, only this time, his apprentice was already artistically developed and didn't need much direction.

Duro + Kist + Pre 1980

Duro, Kist (Lovin2), Dondi (Pre)

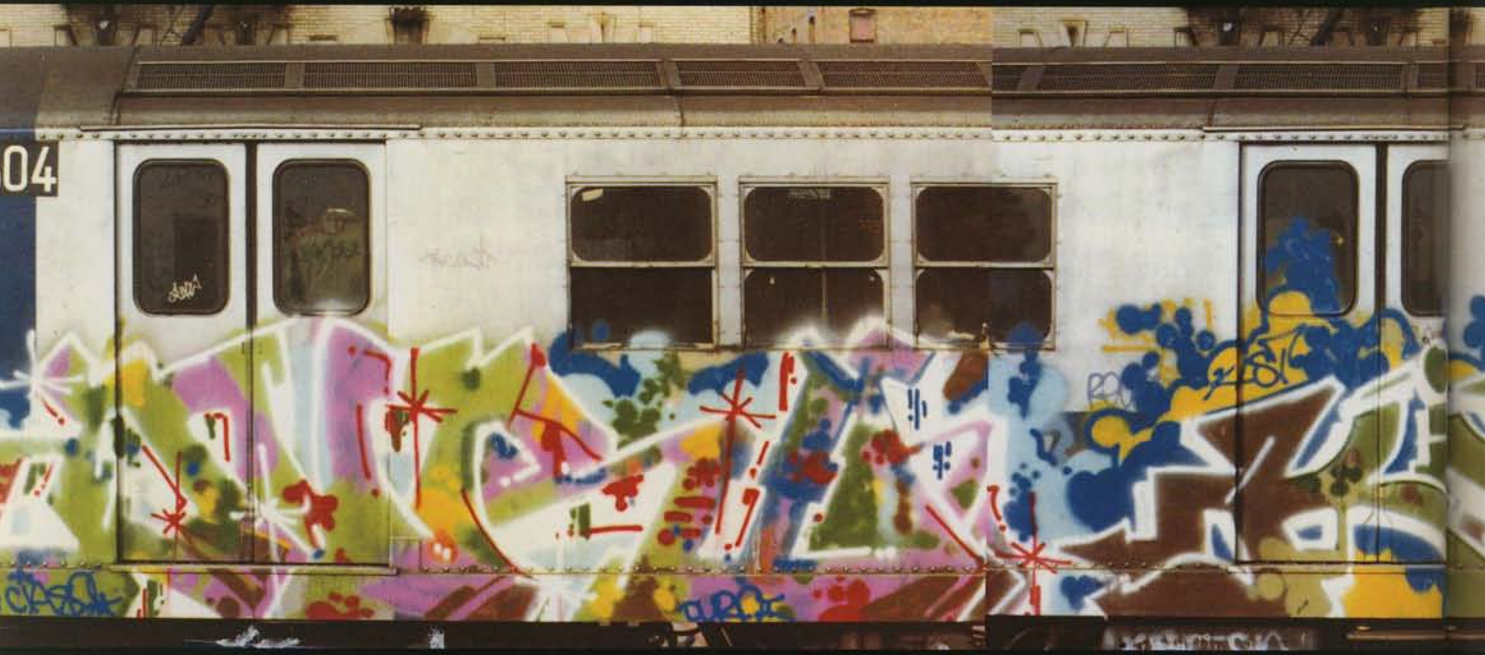
photo: Henry Chalfant

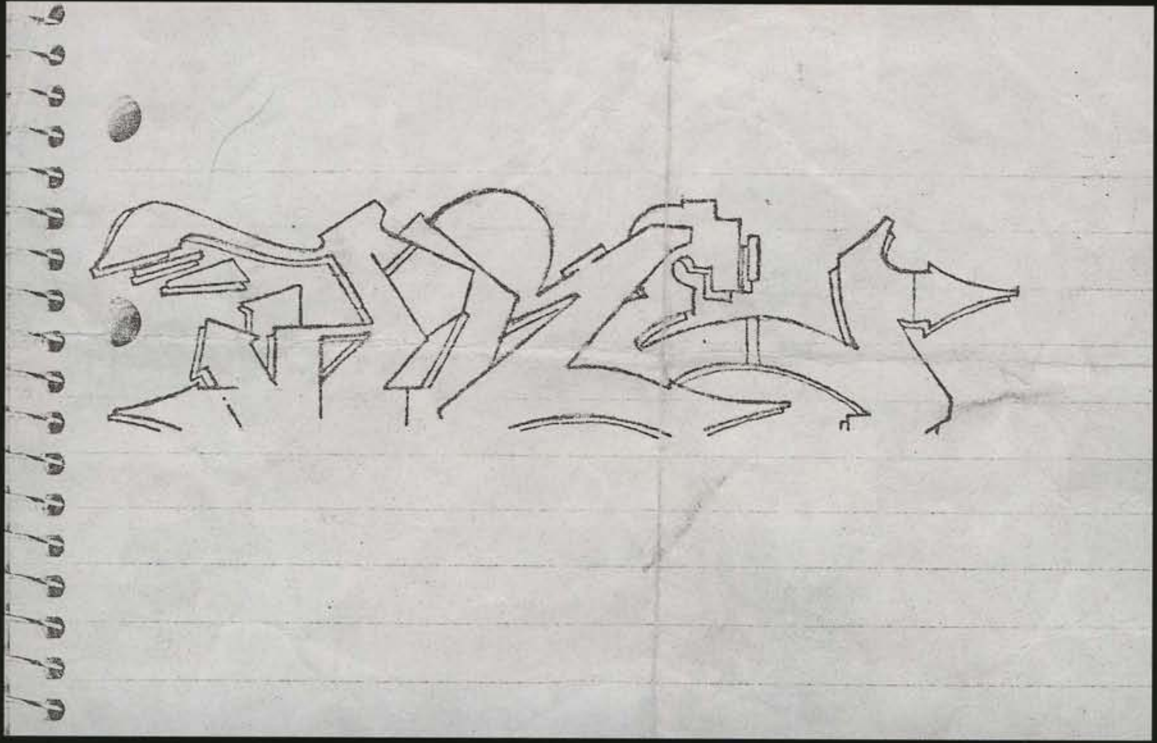
Doc:

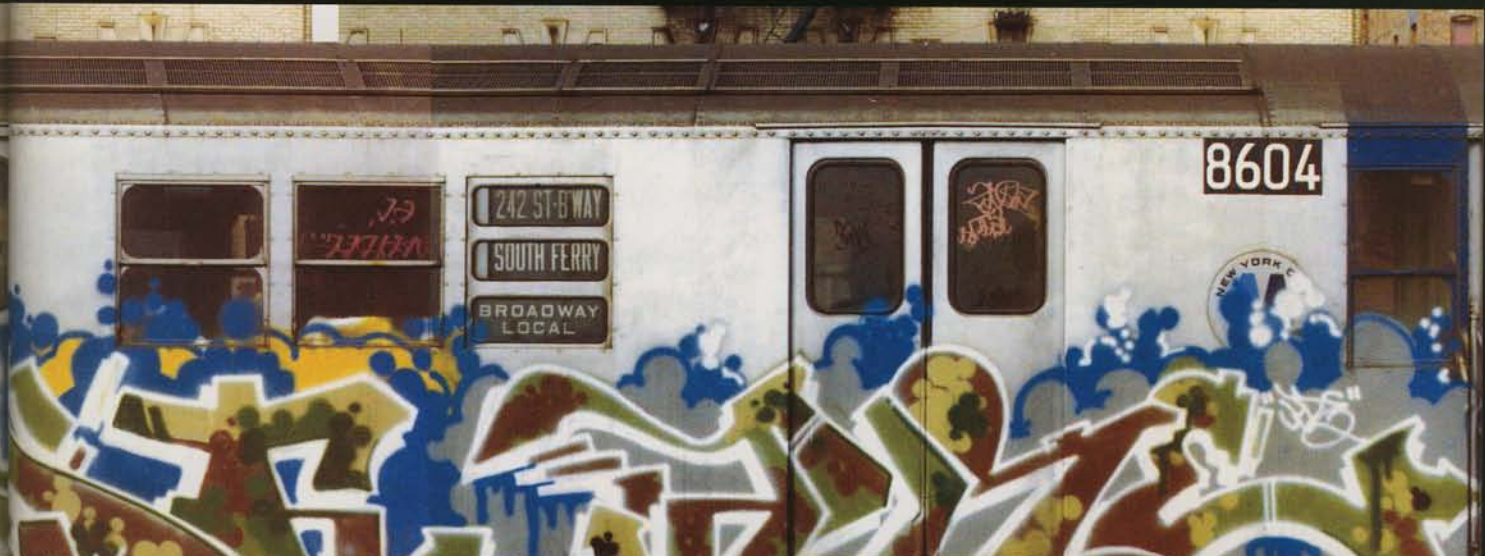
This is one of my all-time favorites. A lot of people don't know, but I was stockpiling names because I was getting Dondi back into writing. So, for Dondi's, I had DOC; for Asia's, I had ARAB; for Pre, I had MAJOR PULL, which I used for ROLL pieces as well, and for Mr. White, I had MR. WAVE.

Duro:

This was done in the 1 tunnel on Broadway. Dondi painted the KIST piece as well as the PRE. Rasta and Eddie were there that night, and Kid 56 and Keno did whole cars. Rasta put up CIA and Eddie hit insides and did some throw-ups.



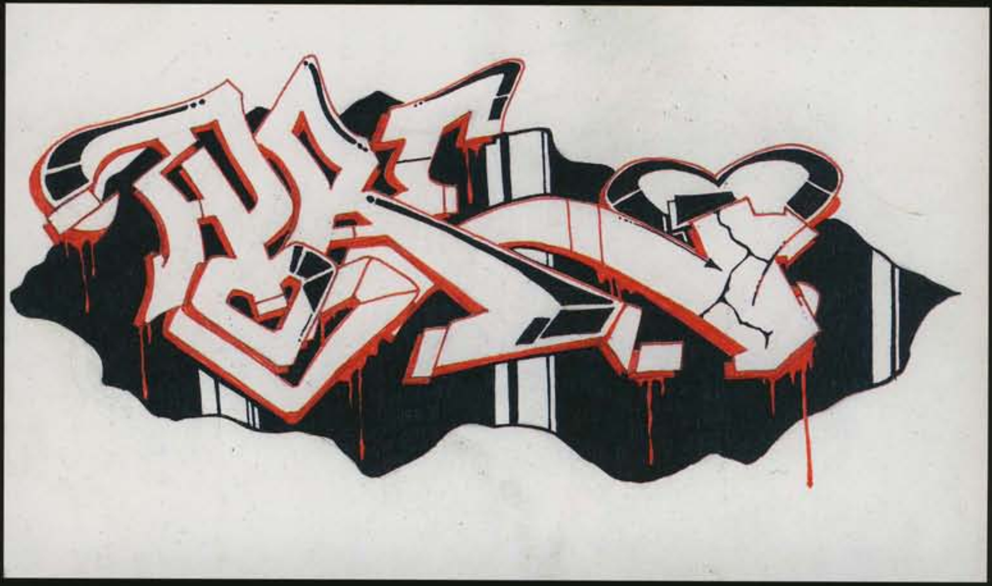




8604
242 ST-B'WAY
SOUTH FERRY
BROADWAY
LOCAL
NEW YORK C
CIA
DONDI

Pre 1979
Pre + Kid + Duro
Dondi (Pre), Kid, Duro

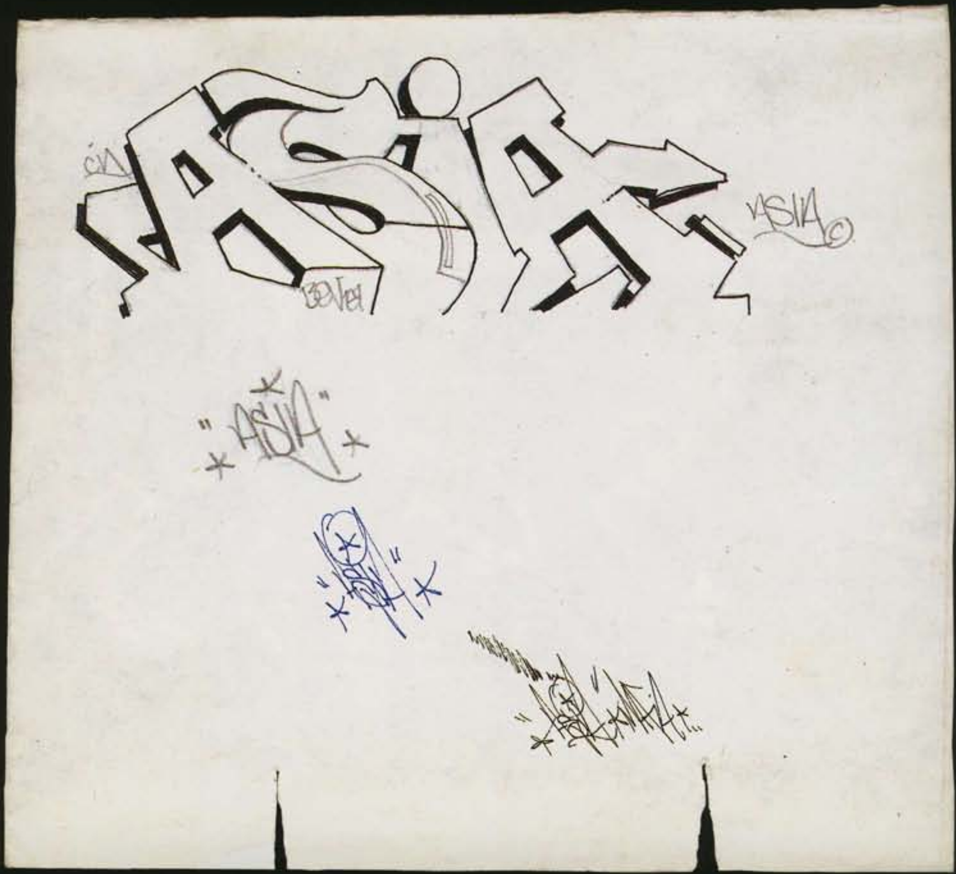
Duro:
We went in the yards and got chased by workbums. We always tricked the workbums by ducking between the cars and running back in the direction they had come from. We could actually watch them look for us. Dr. Pepper ran home, and it was his paint, so we did a top to bottom CODE for him that night as well.

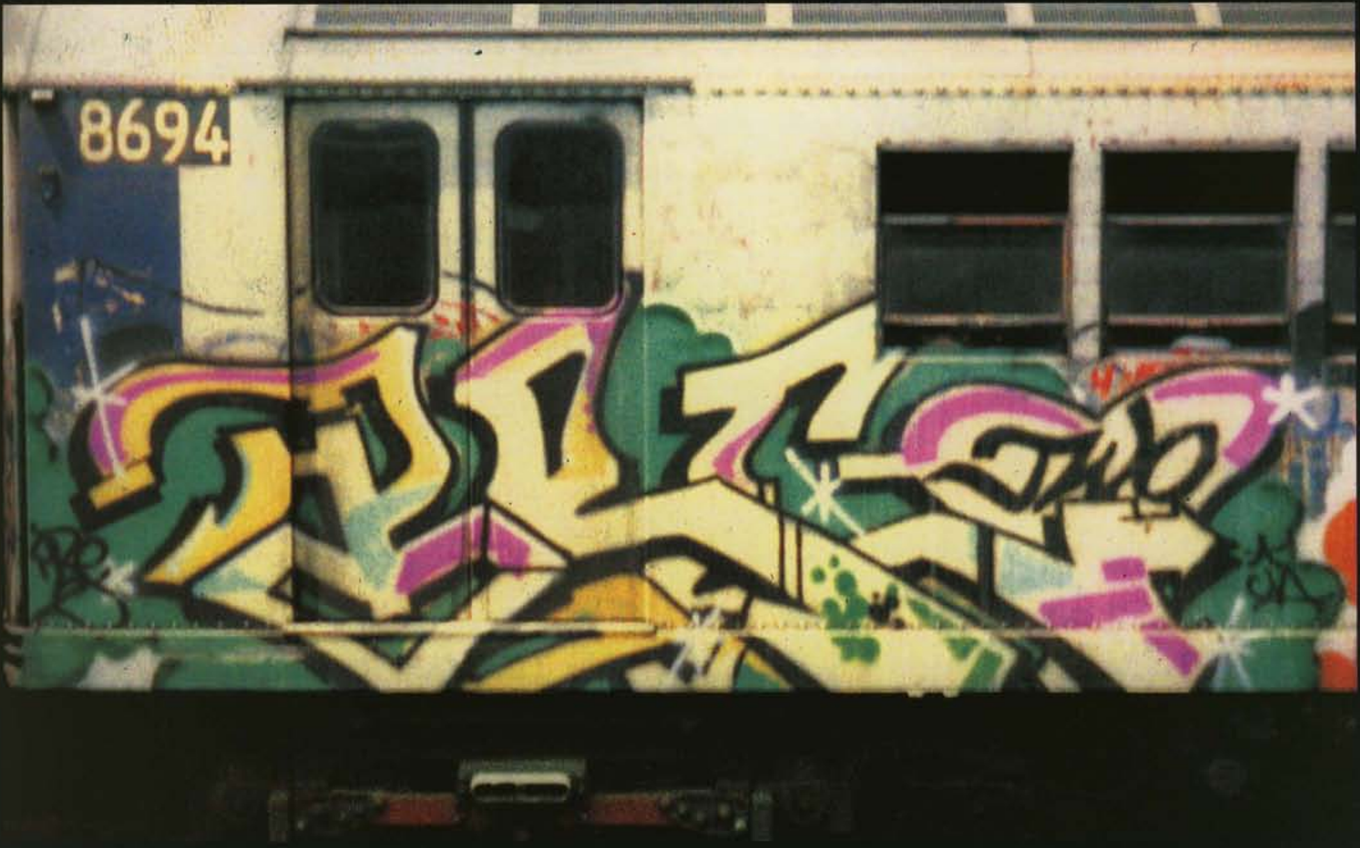


Asia 1980

Duro:
This is the first ASIA piece that Dondi did.

Doc:
This confused the whole planet; when he started doing these ASIA pieces in the corner of the car. He did these with leftover paint. I think he only did about four or five of them. I asked him why he placed them where he did, and he just shrugged me off, saying, "Why not?" But trust me, there was a reason. With Dondi, there was always a reason.

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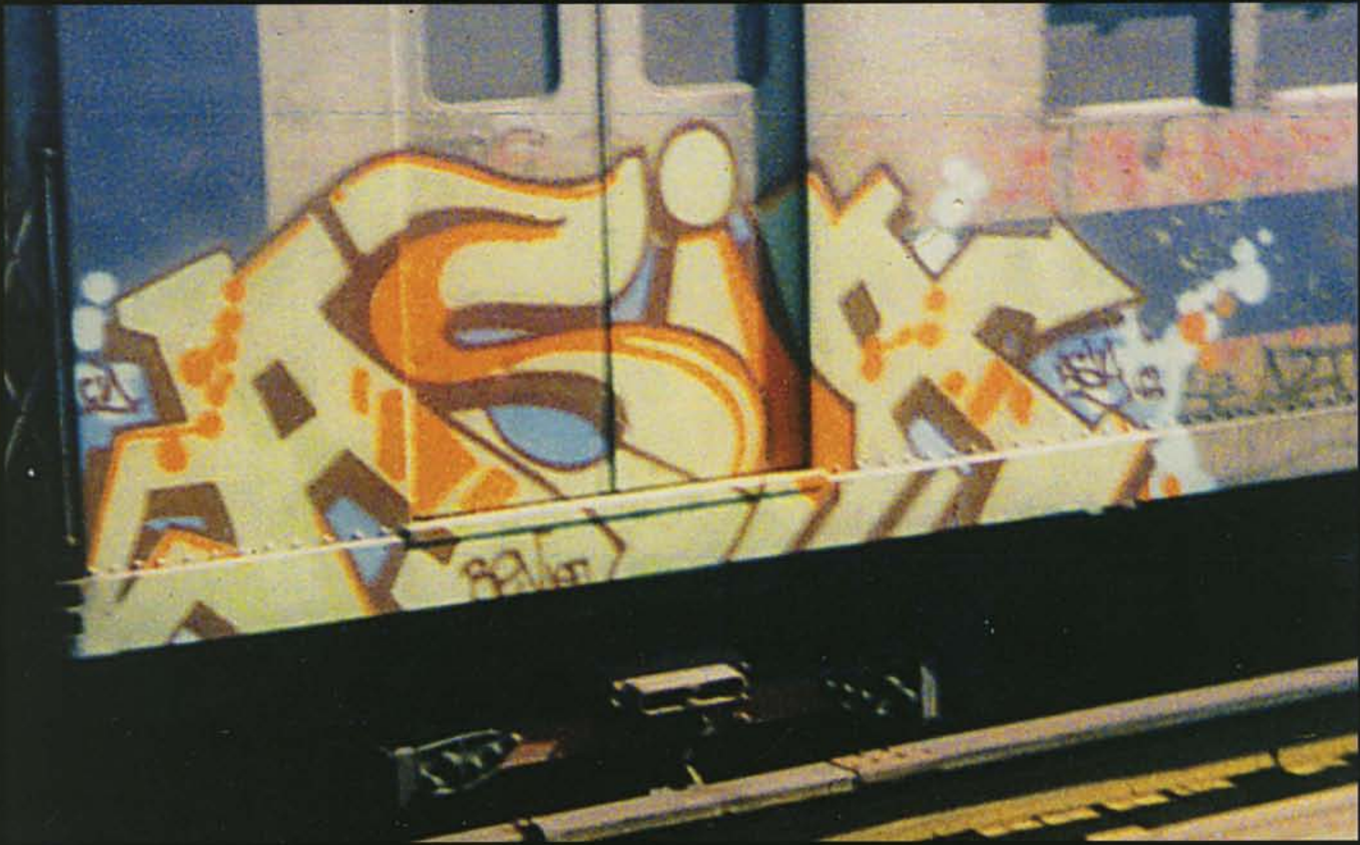
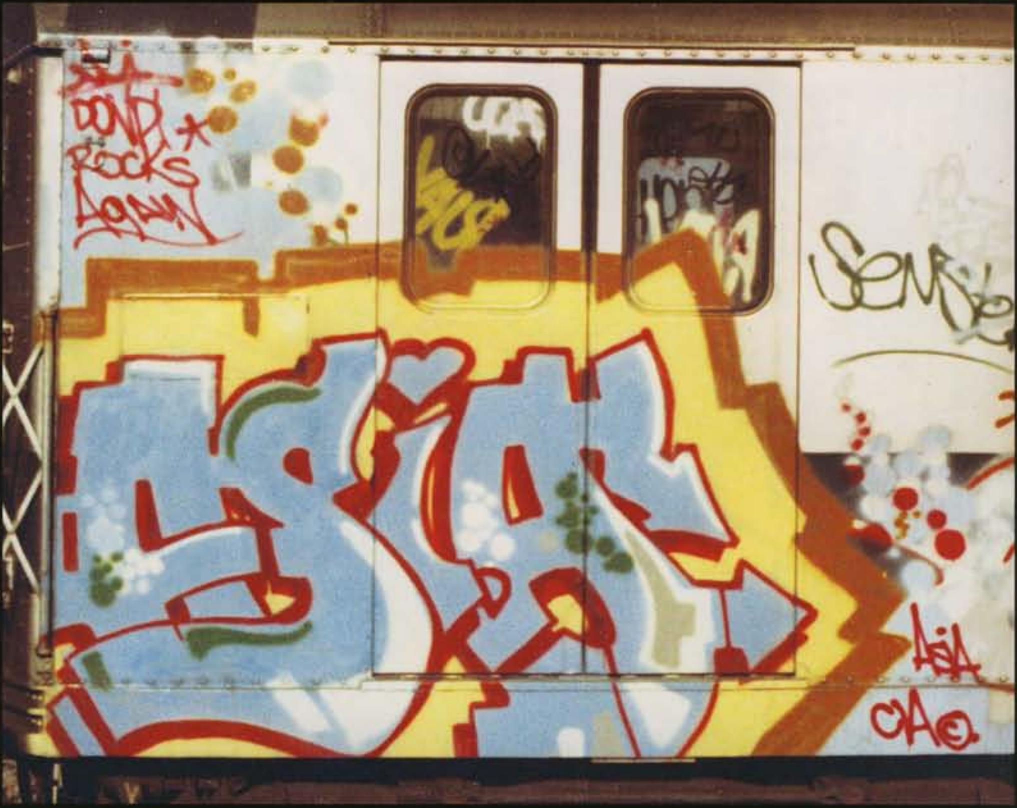


Asia 1980
photo: Henry Chalfant

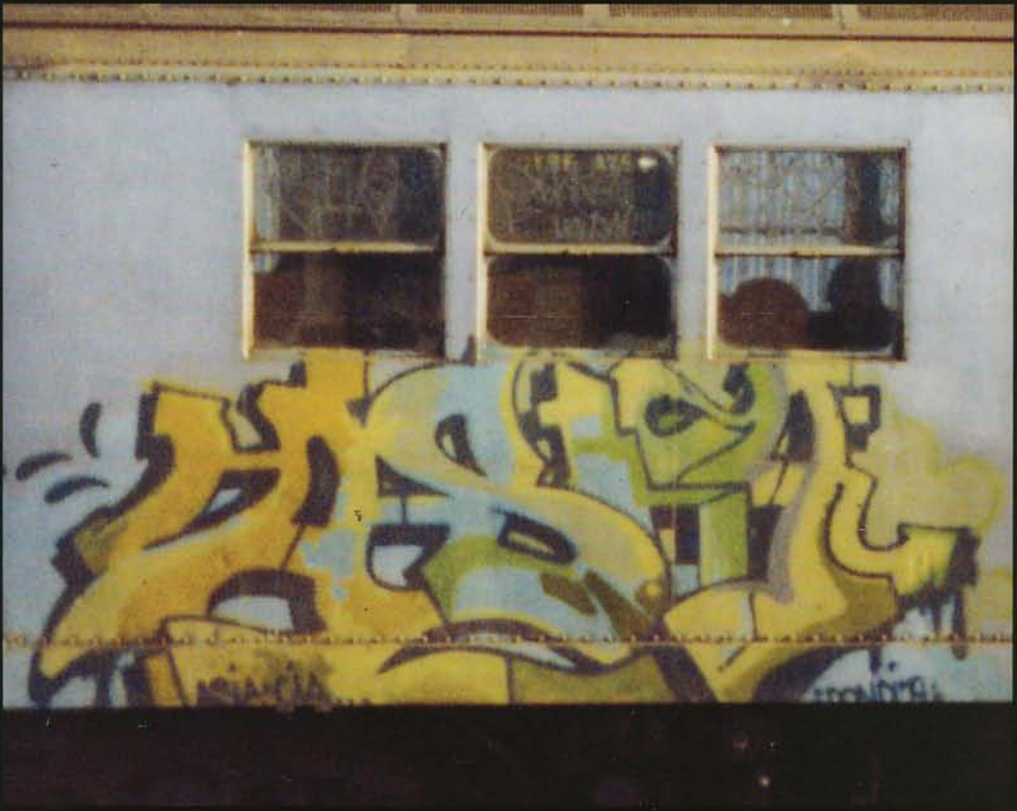
Kel:
This was at a point where Dondi and I had sort of drifted apart and we weren't partners anymore. I spoke to Doc when Dondi came up with the ASIA tag. Chain had been doing ASH or ASHER pieces, and that's how ASIA came about.

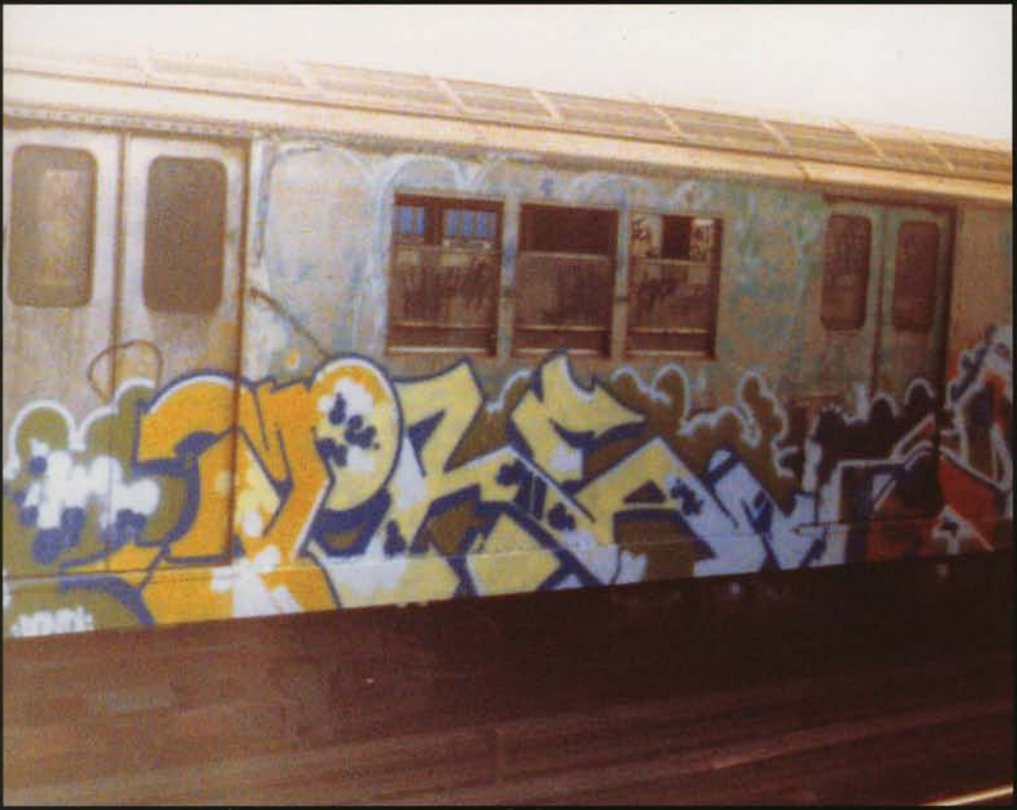
Zephyr:
Believe it or not, this piece was done with scraps. After we'd do a car, most of us would run around and do throw-ups with the leftover cans. Dondi usually had other plans. He'd sneak off to a corner of the yard and light up the edge of a car with an amazing little burner like this one.



Asia 1980

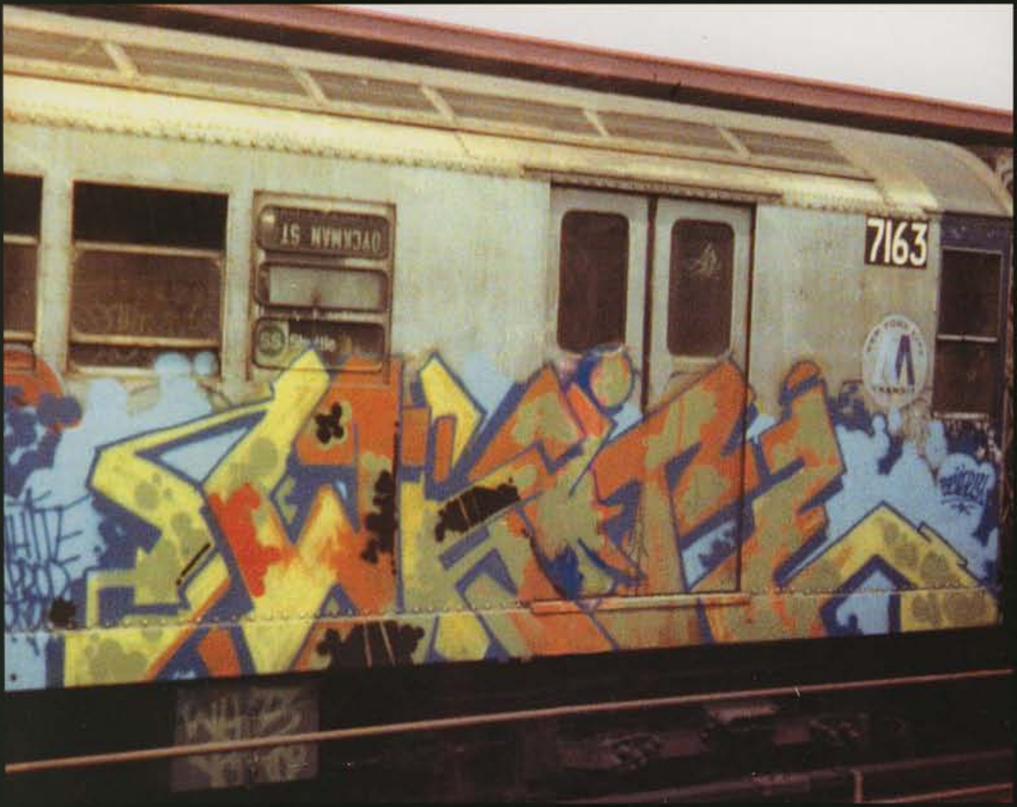
Doc:
Whenever I thought that I was running shit, I would brag to Dondi. But then I'd go by his house, and he'd take me into his room, and then leave me there. There'd be a black book open on his art table, with a great piece in it. Dondi would come back in and just shut the book. It was his way of letting me know I wasn't on his level. Dondi would only break down his style for you in pieces. I hung out with him for a whole year before he let me see his photo album.





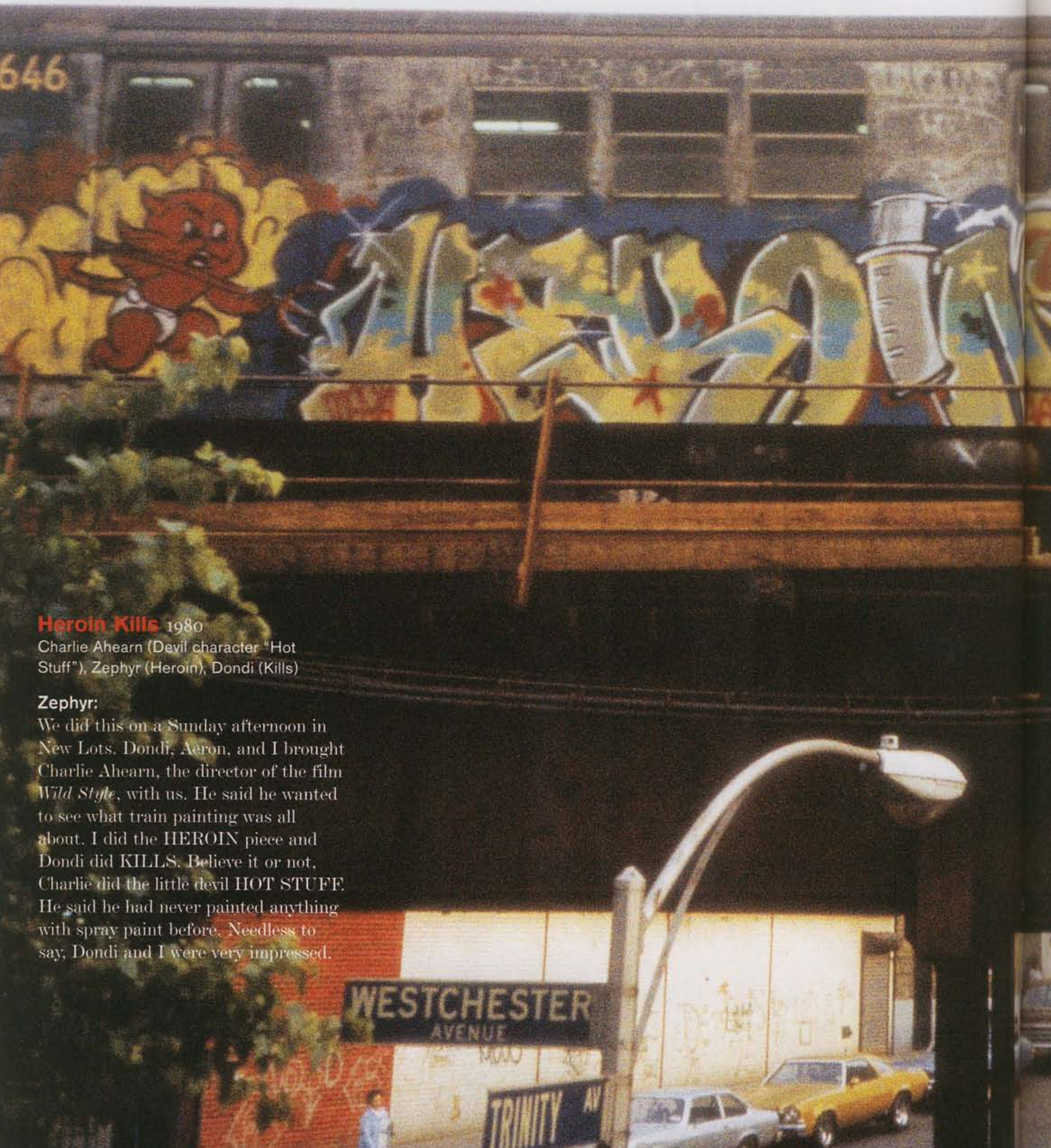
Pre 1980
Pre + Duro
Dondi (Pre), Duro

Zephyr:
This PRE piece is quintessential Dondi–big, round shapes with sharp lines and hard angles. Everyone tried to bite Dondi's stuff, but they just couldn't do it.



White 1979
Sonic + Risk + White
Sonic, Rammellzee (Risk),
Dondi (White)

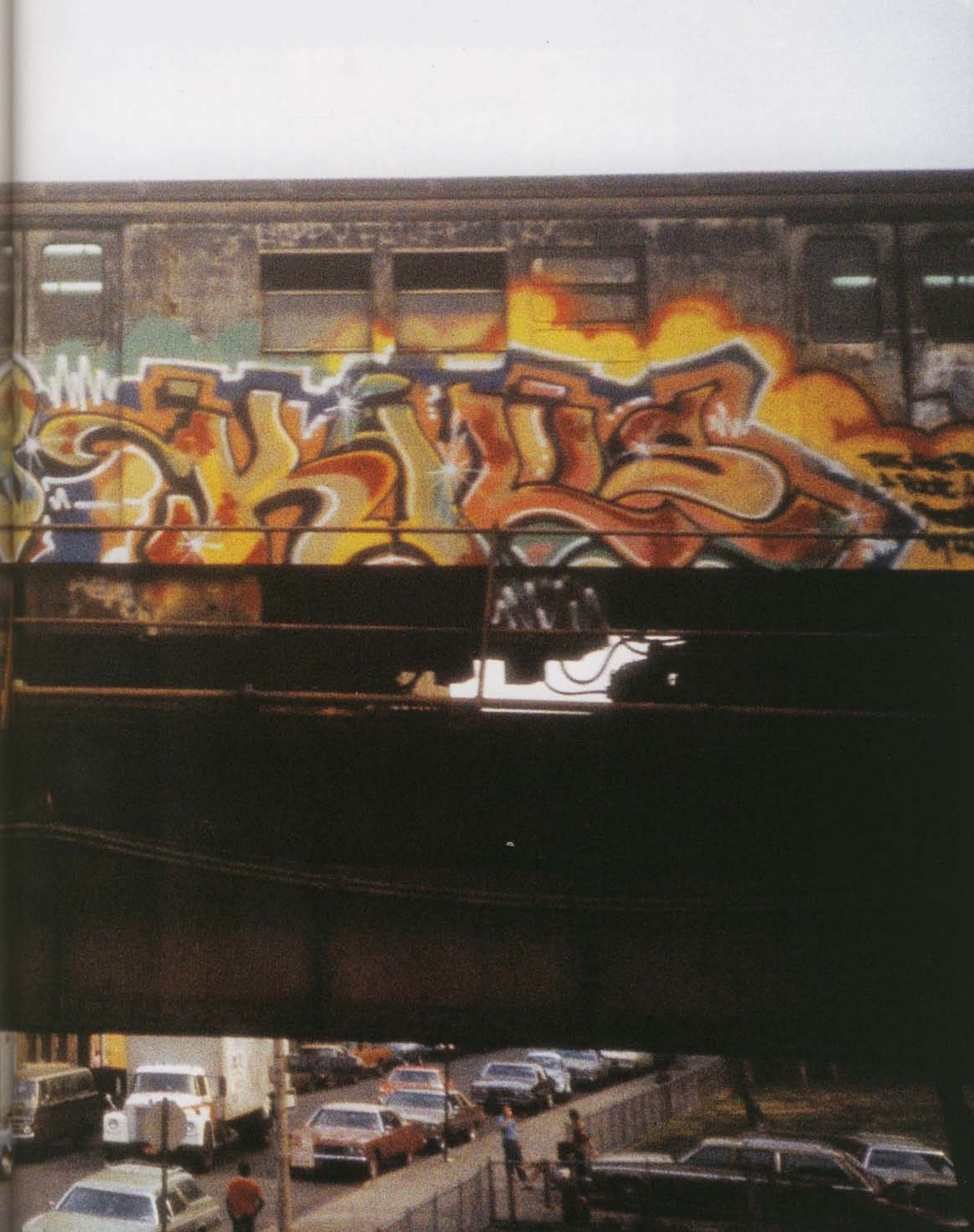
Daze:
This is one of the first times Rammellzee painted on a train using his iconoclast panzerism theory—his theory of armored lettering.



Heroin Kills 1980
Charlie Ahearn (Devil character "Hot Stuff"), Zephyr (Heroin), Dondi (Kills)

Zephyr:

We did this on a Sunday afternoon in New Lots. Dondi, Aeron, and I brought Charlie Ahearn, the director of the film *Wild Style*, with us. He said he wanted to see what train painting was all about. I did the HEROIN piece and Dondi did KILLS. Believe it or not, Charlie did the little devil HOT STUFF. He said he had never painted anything with spray paint before. Needless to say, Dondi and I were very impressed.



Pose 1979

photo: Henry Chalfant

Pose + Ched + Solid

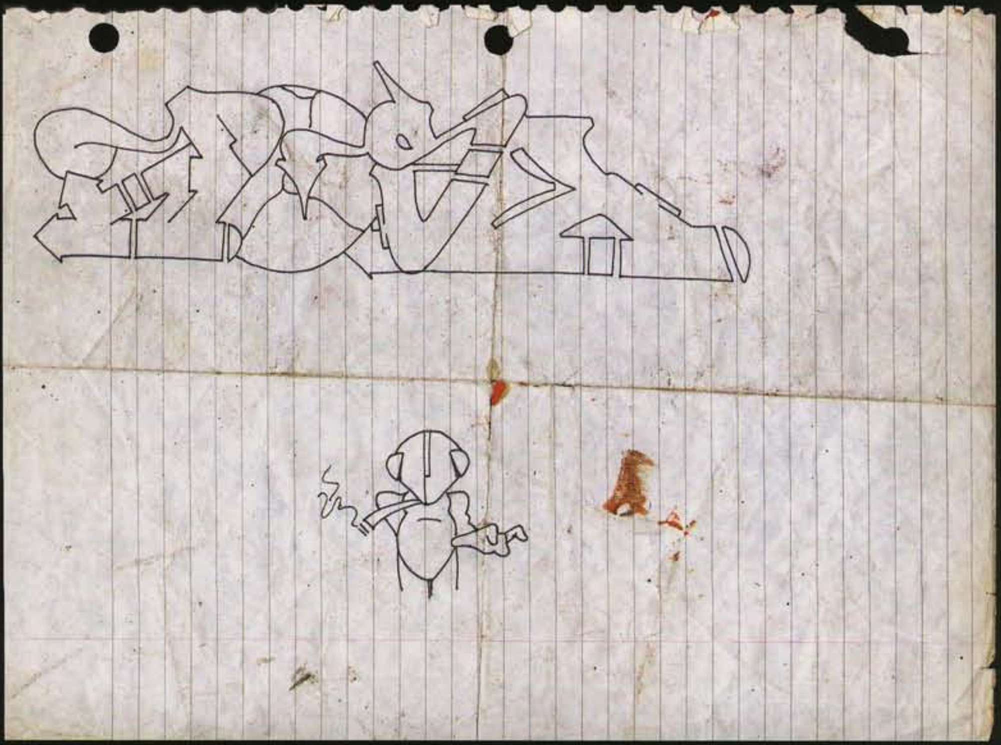
Dondi (Pose), Med 167 (Ched), Fuzz (Solid)

Doc:

We didn't have black books at this time. We were from East New York. We didn't go to art school. It wasn't until 1980 that the writers I knew had black books. It wasn't until kids from the 'hood started going to Art and Design that we were introduced to this stuff. We drew in our school books. It was that or homework. Guess which Dondi chose?

Spar:

Fuzz, a rack up king, provided most of the paint for this.



Pose 1979

photo: Henry Chalfant

Pose + Pad + Macho

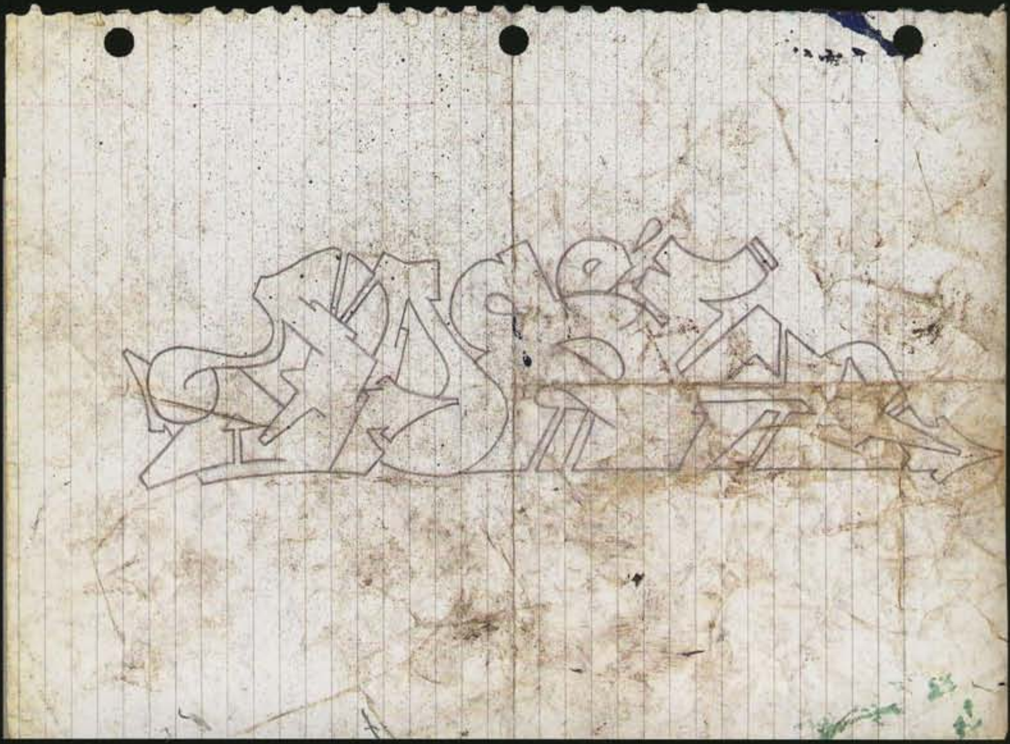
Dondi (Pose), Kel (Pad), Macho (Kado)

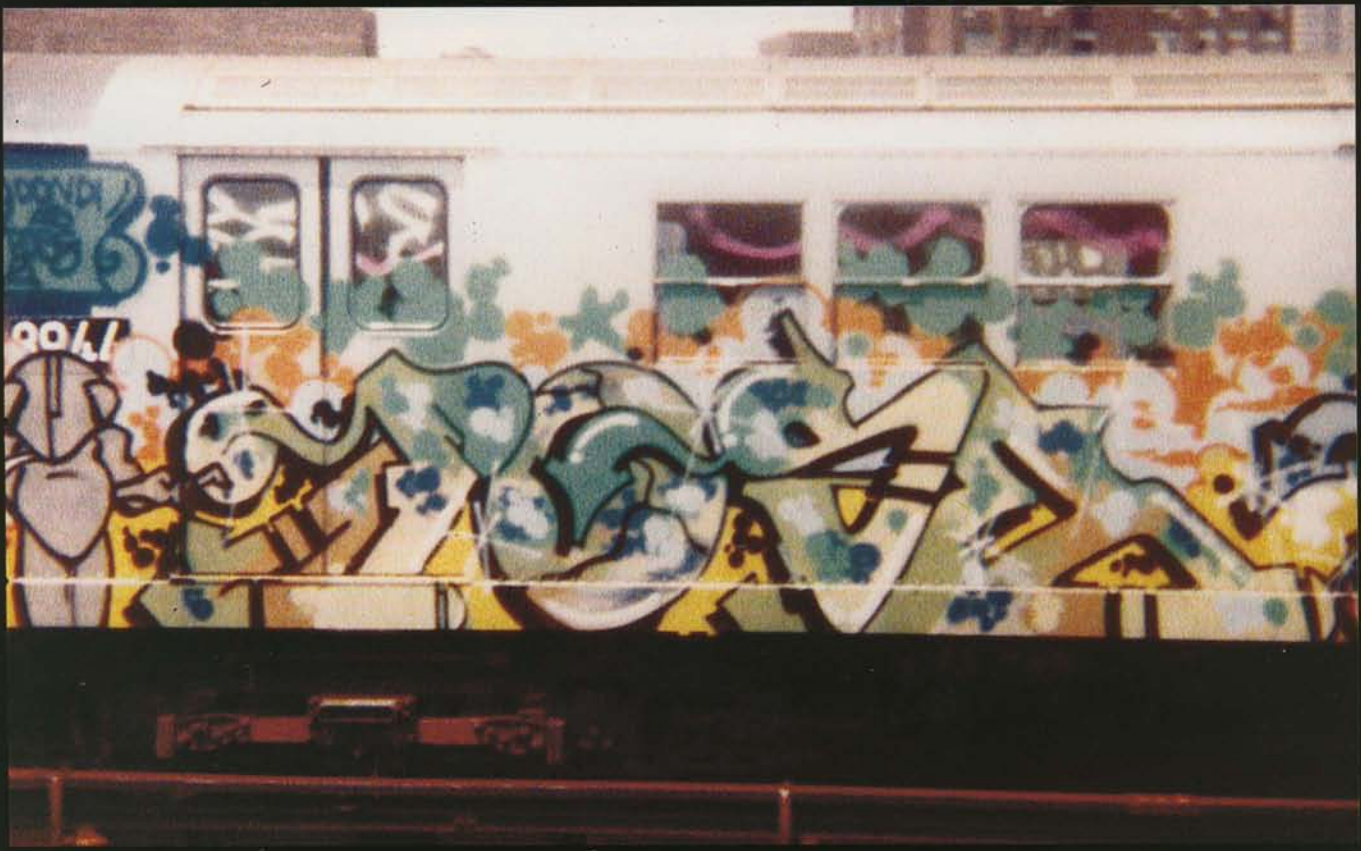
Doc:

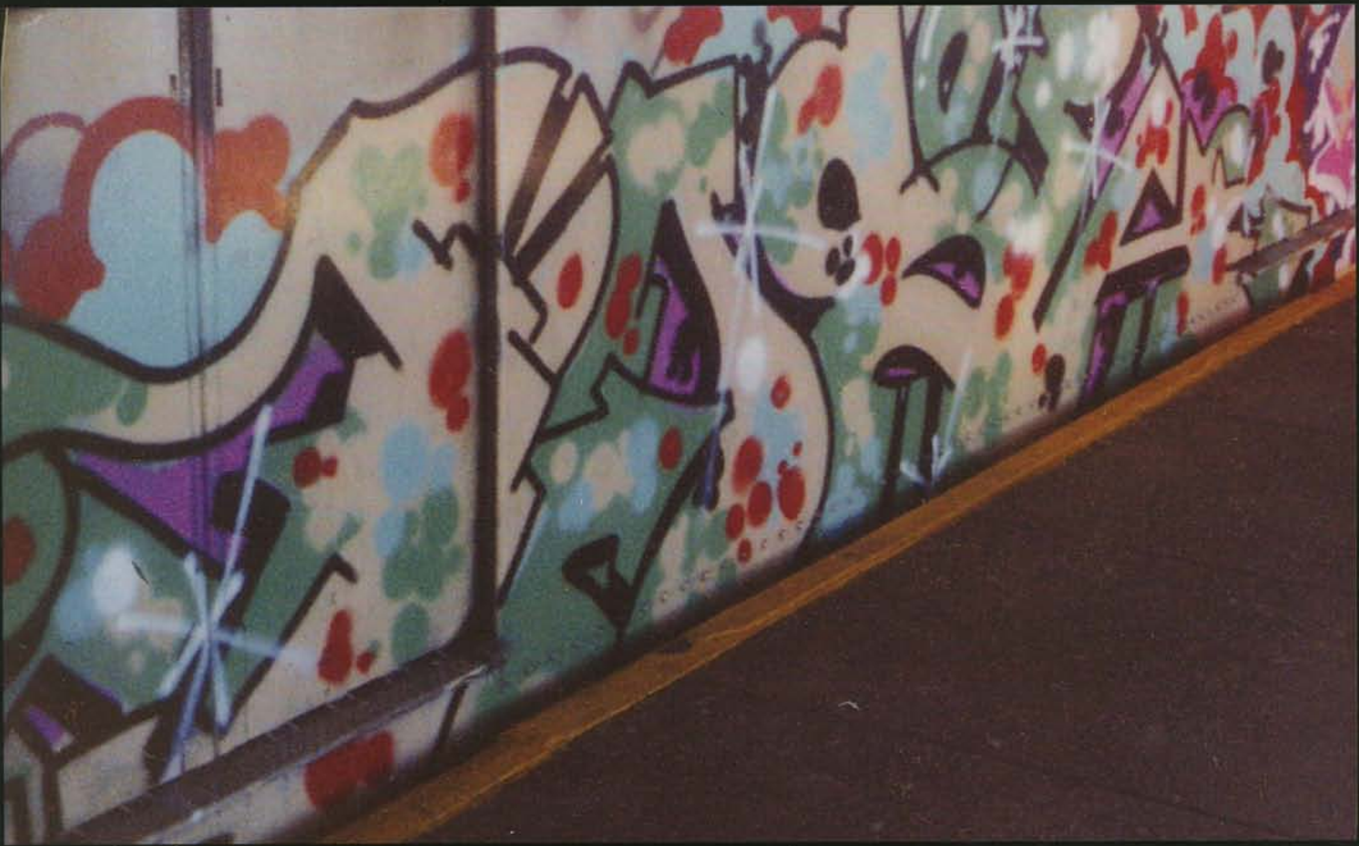
Pose was a crazy name. The "S" to the "E" connect–there were so many possibilities. Straight murder.

Spar:

Dondi told me that everything went really smoothly this night. Kel provided most of the paint.







Pose 1980

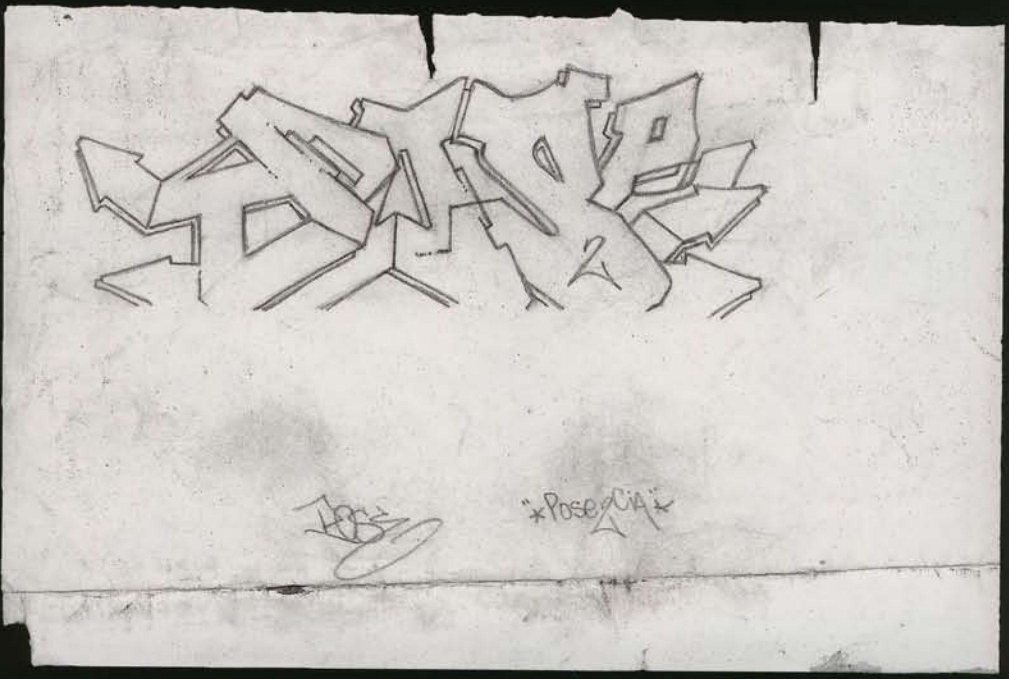
photo: Henry Chalfant

Pose + Deal

Dondi (Pose), Deal

Doc:

This "P" is a study in style. It has balance. It leans. But the weight of the arrows keeps it together. Dondi didn't talk about mechanics, but Rammellzee did. He would explain it to me, and I appreciated what Dondi was doing on a whole new level. His letters had movement, but they were always balanced. The bottom is missing from the sketch because the piece would float at the bottom of the train.



Pose 1982

photo: Henry Chalfant

Pose + Duro

Dondi (Pose), Duro

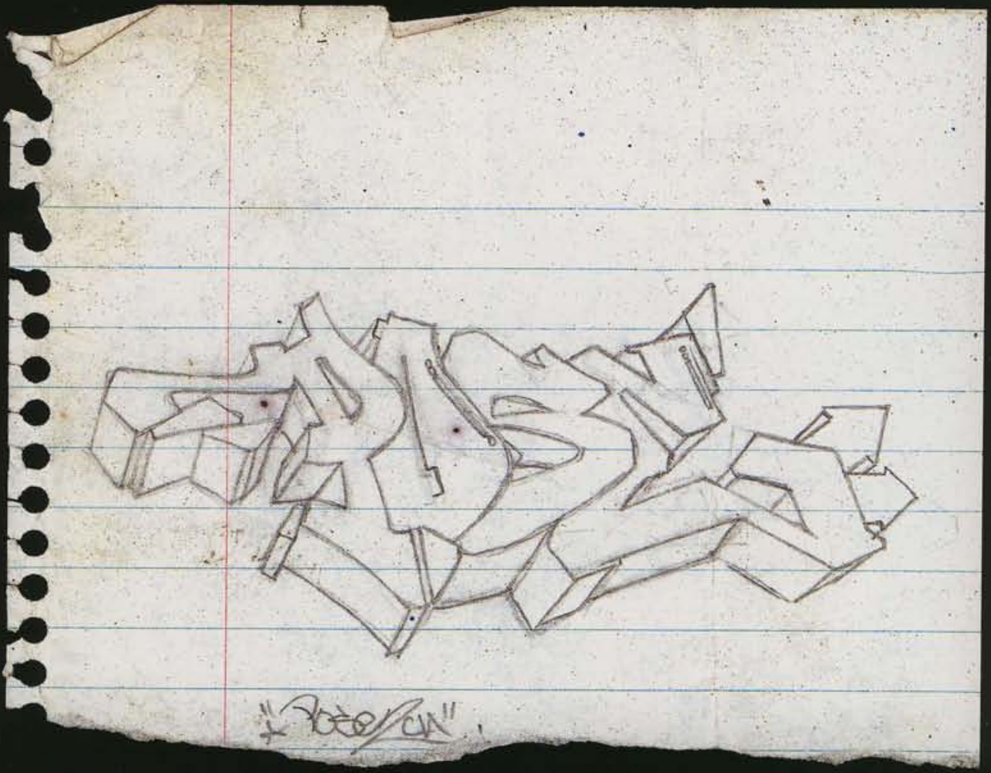
Doc:

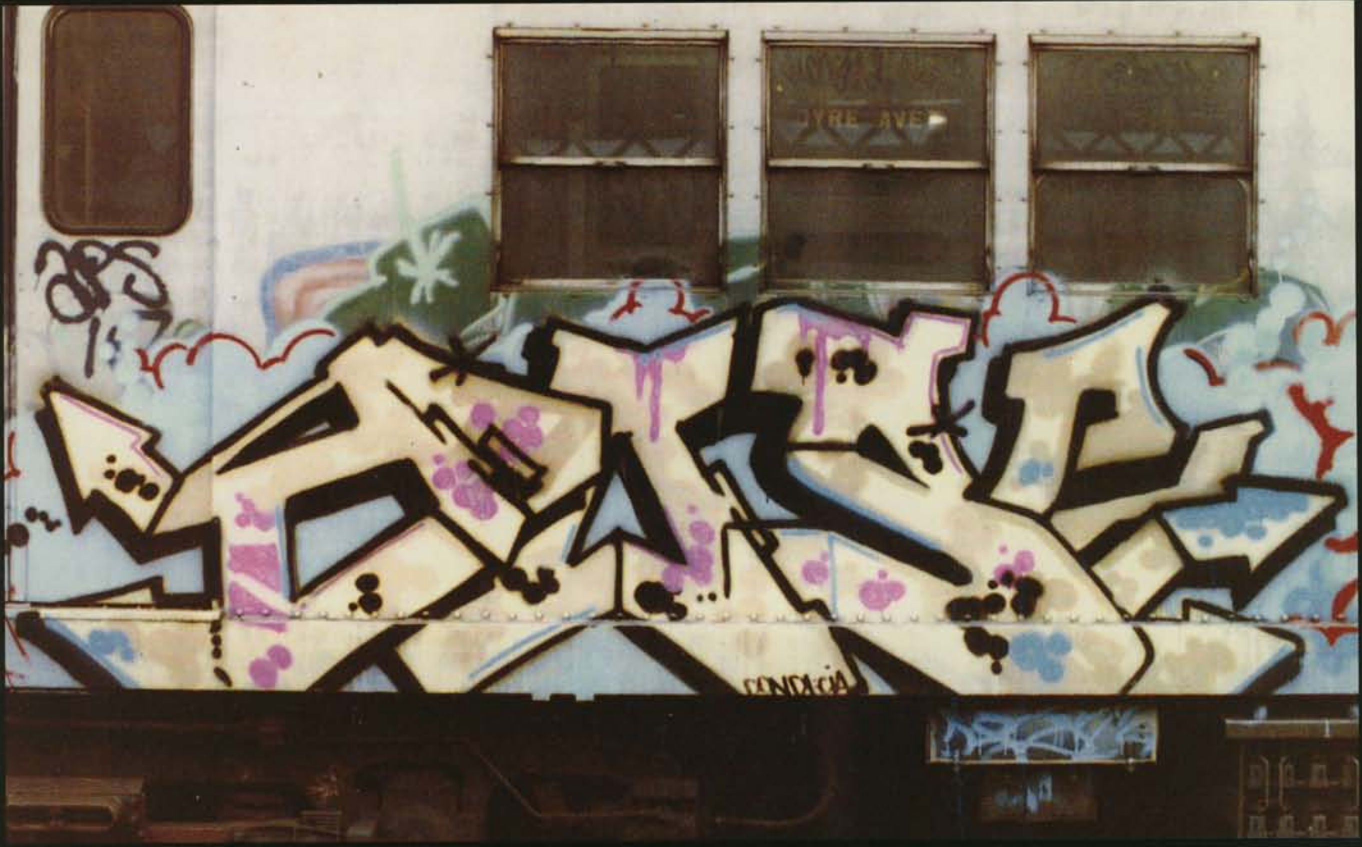
I love the "P". The pump off the "P" isn't a mistake–it holds it up. Dondi never explained how he did it, he would just say, "What do you mean? That's the way it has to be. That's the way it is."

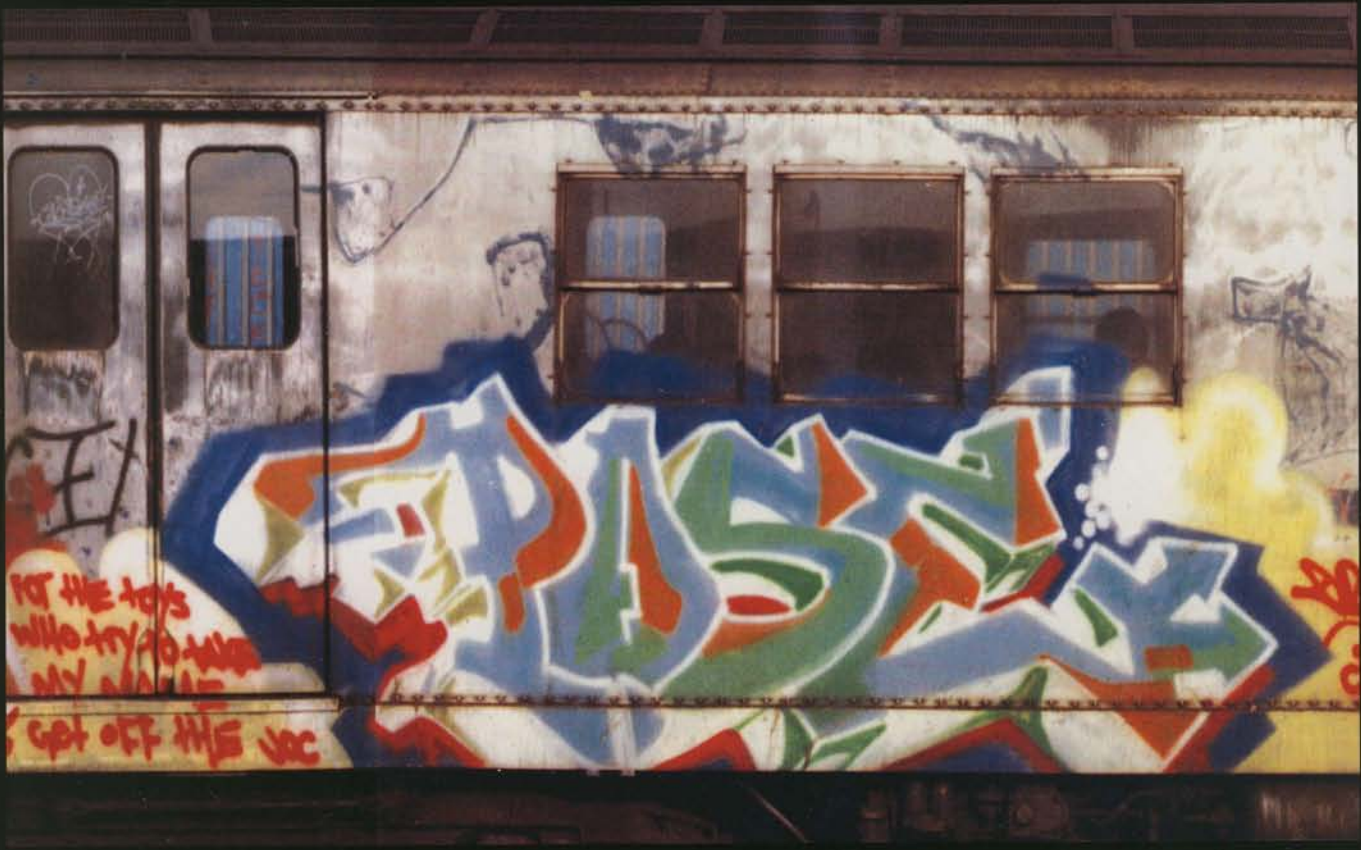
Duro:

I love the line Dondi wrote here: "For the toys that tried to take my name."

There was another guy trying to write POSE at the time.




DYRE AVE


Put the toys
who try to take
my name
get off the joc

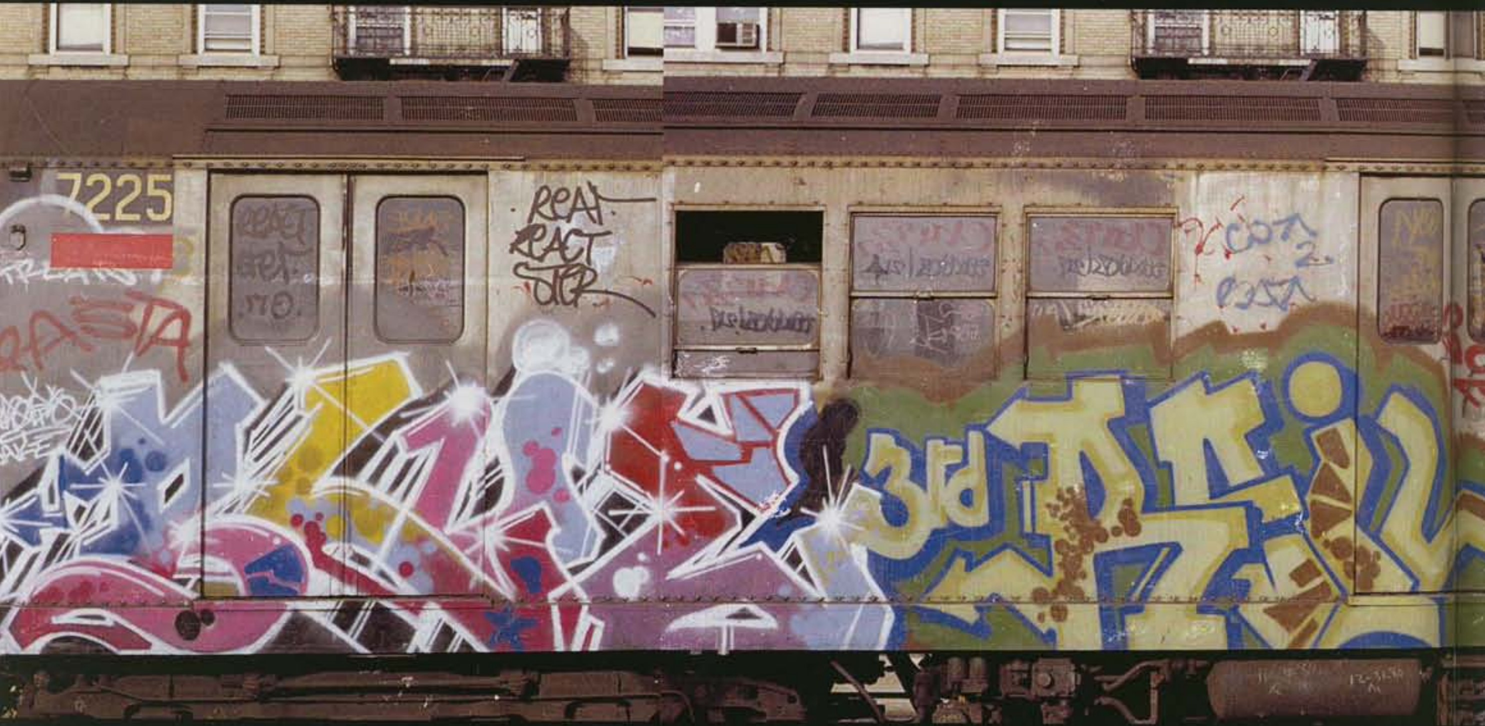
Blue + 3rd Rail + Zephyr 1980

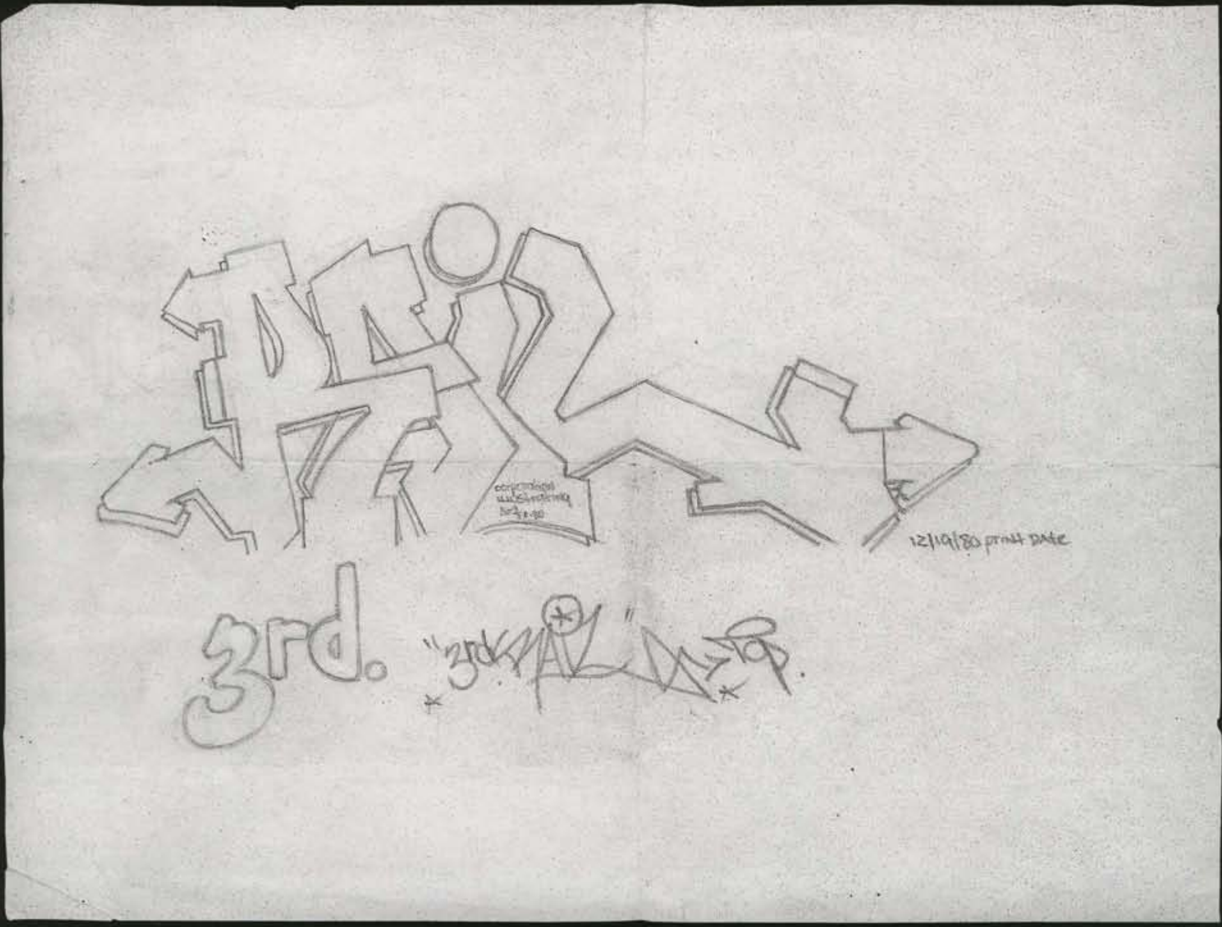
photo: Henry Chalfant

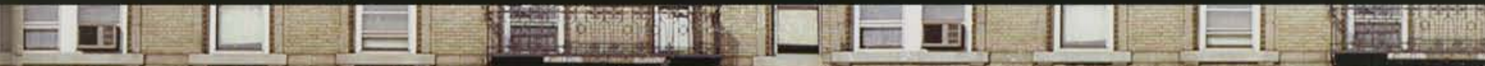
Rasta (Blue), Dondi (3rd Rail), Zephyr

Zephyr:

Christmas Eve, 1980. It was damn cold. We tried to go to the No. 1 tunnel but there was too much activity so we ended up in the No. 3 yard. We began to paint the upper half of the car, but workers showed up and we had to bail. Luckily we finished our names. The inscription I wrote says "We wanted to do a def Christmas special, but the yard is not chilly tonite."



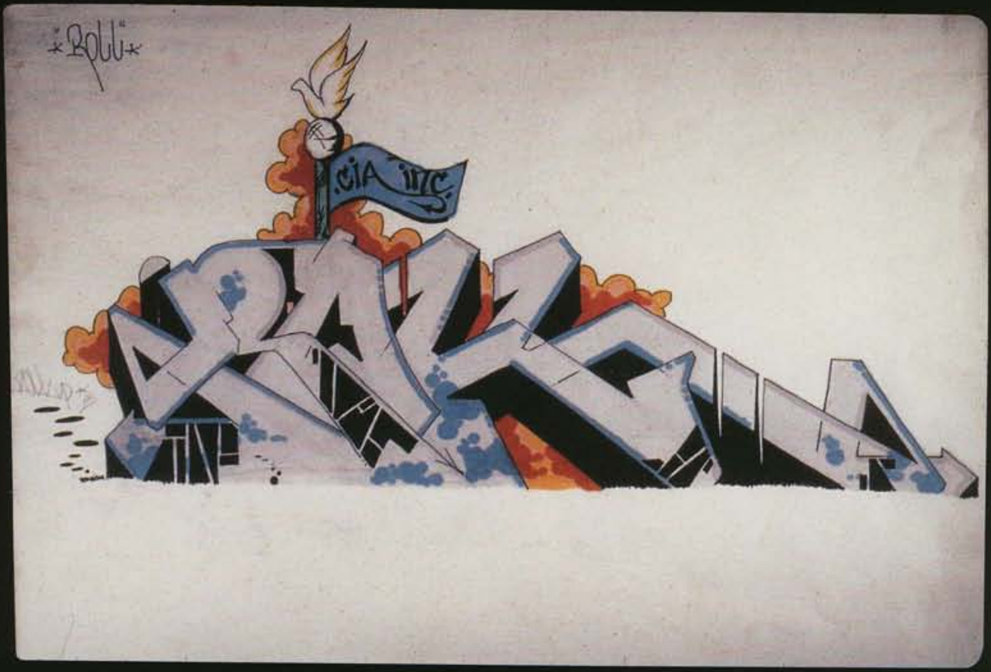

12/19/80 print Date
3rd.


"DON'T STRAIN YER BRAIN-
NOC.
PAINT A TRAIN!
WE WANTED TO DO SOME
BUT THE YA
MAS
Tonite..
TDS
gettin

Roll 1979
photo: Henry Chalfant
Roll Up

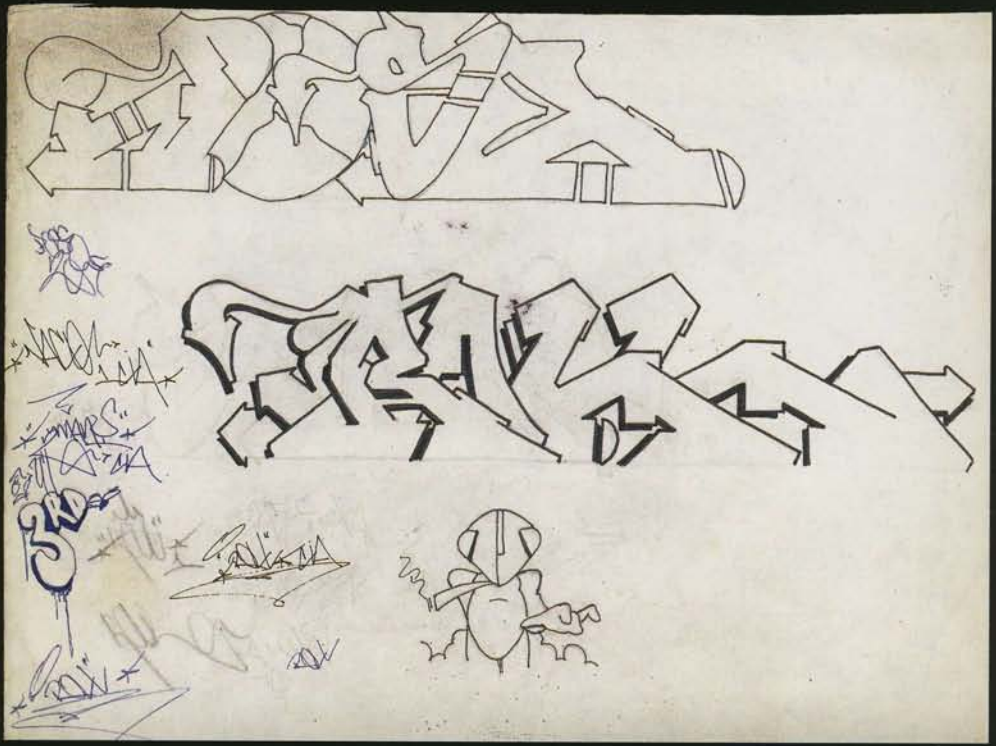
Doc:
This is one of the most remarkable pieces. No one ever thought about doing something like this. Everyone talked about how those "L's" just rolled out. He caught the line. No one had precision like this. You can tell he didn't have to go back and touch it up.

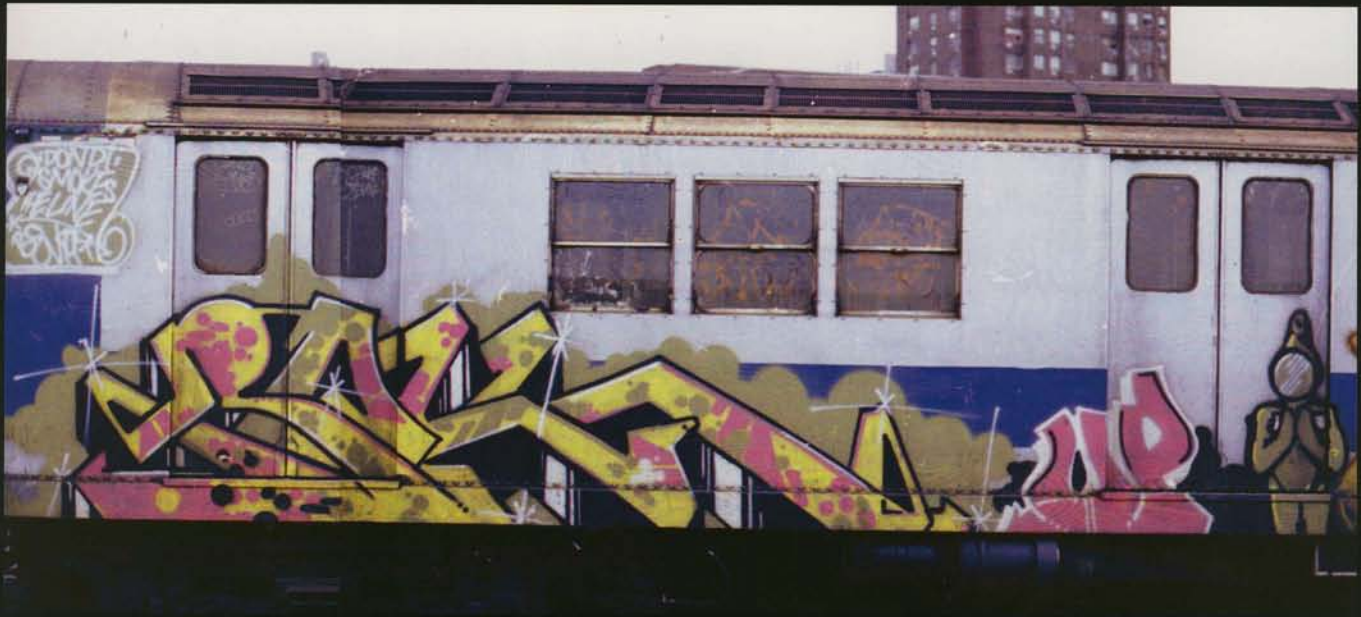
Zephyr:
If I had to pick just one Dondi piece, this would probably be it. This could easily be Dondi's greatest piece ever–it's certainly one of his greatest window-downs. This car had style galore.

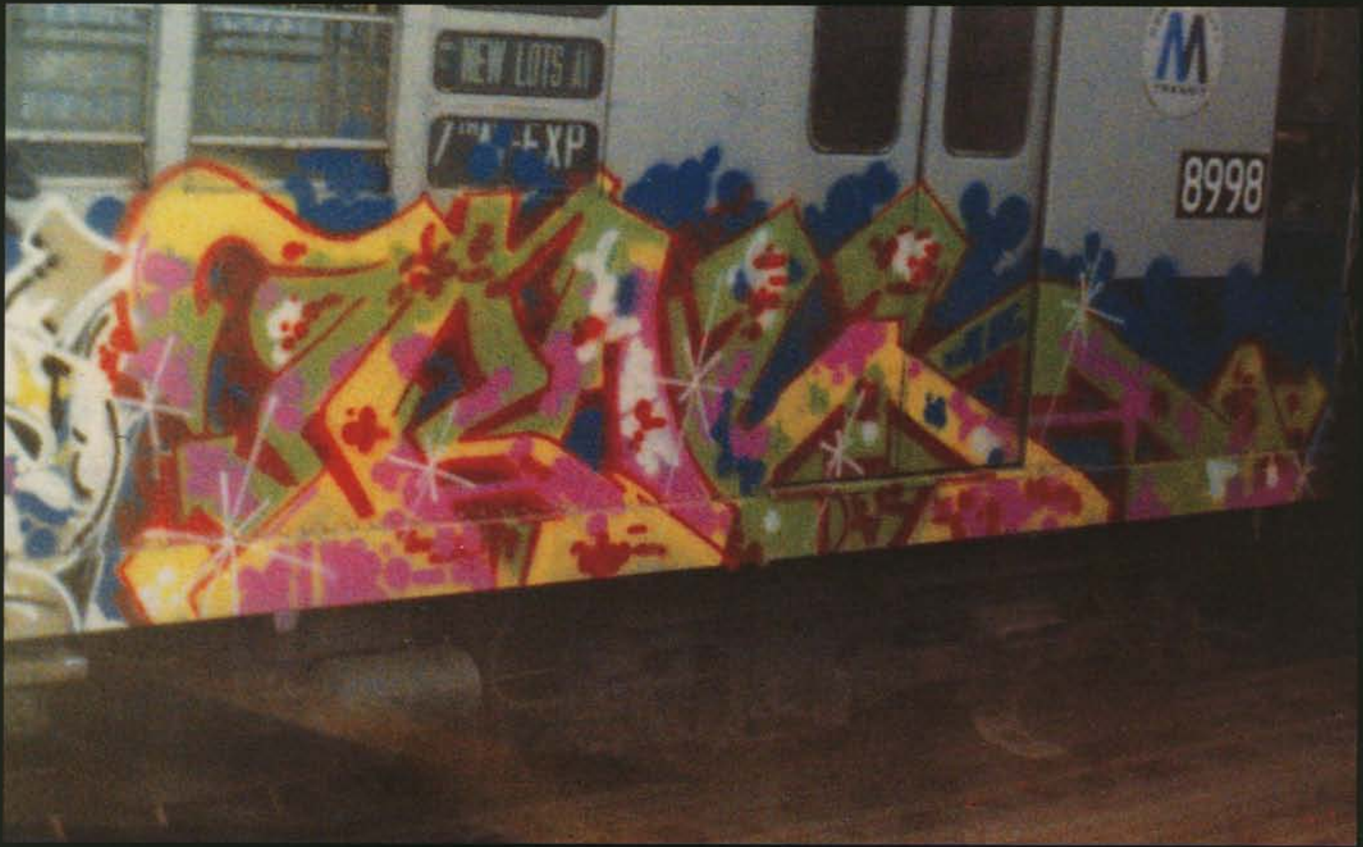


Roll 1979
Hyte + Dr. Prod + Roll
Rammellzee (Hyte), Noc 167 (Dr.Prod), Dondi (Roll)

Duro:
Rasta (from Bushwick), Med, Mare, Kist, Me, Dondi, Fuzz, Crash–there were about ten of us in New Lots that night.





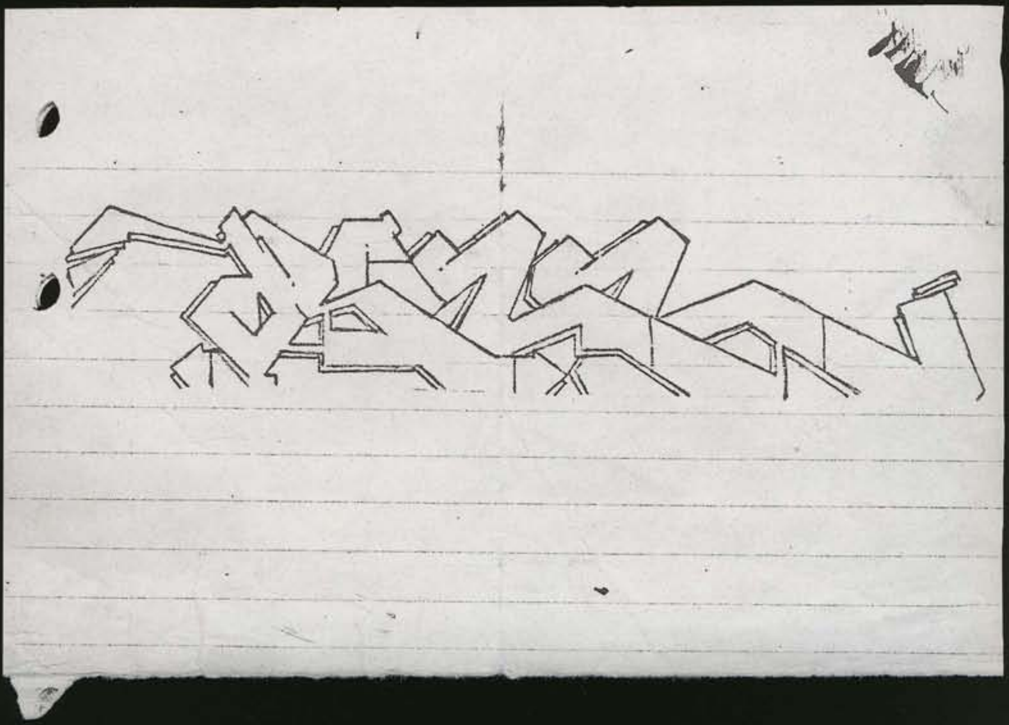

NEW LOTS AV
EXP
8998

Roll 1980

Kase + Roll

Kase, Dondi (Roll)

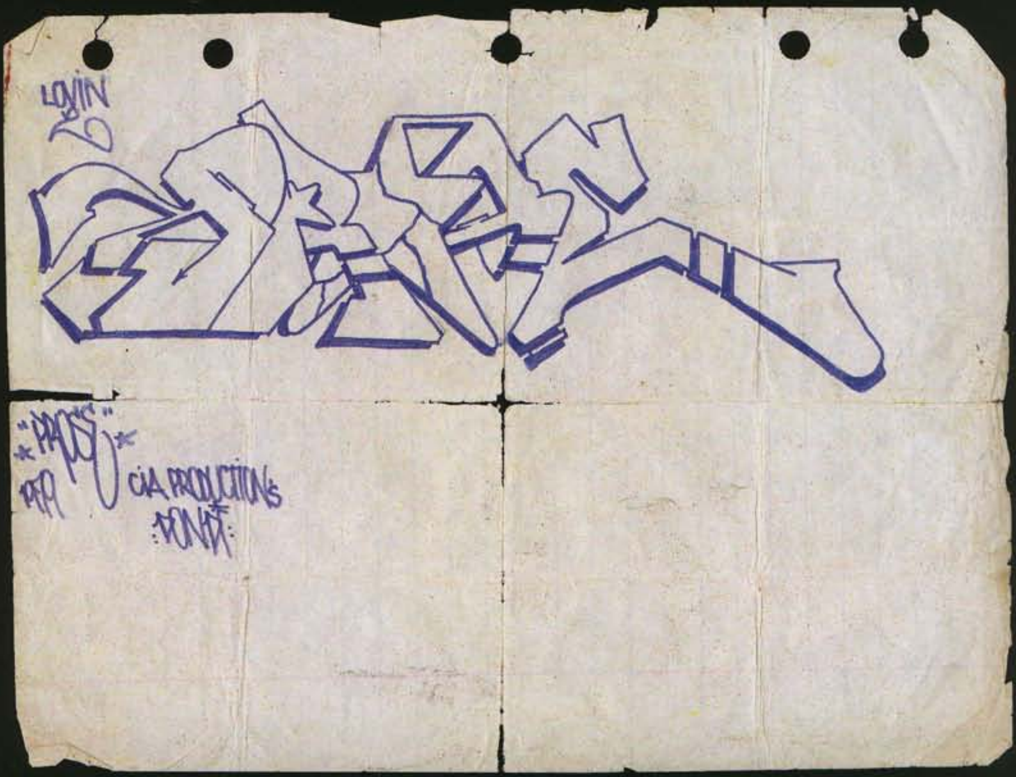
Doc:
He did this one in the No. 1 tunnel with Kase. This was a KASE-ROLL. Someone came along later and wrote "Led Zeppelin" on it. Dondi knew Kase from hanging out at all the spots.

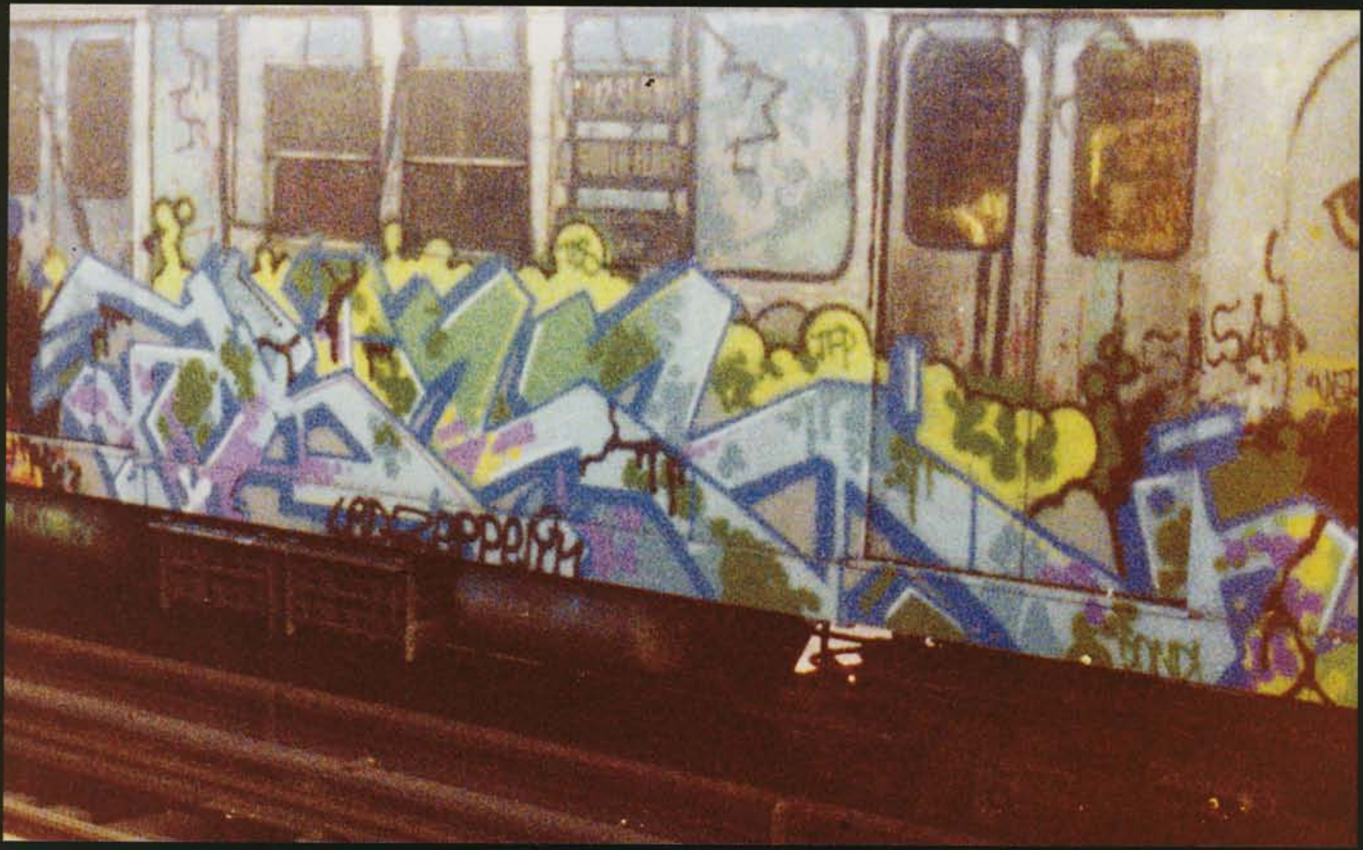


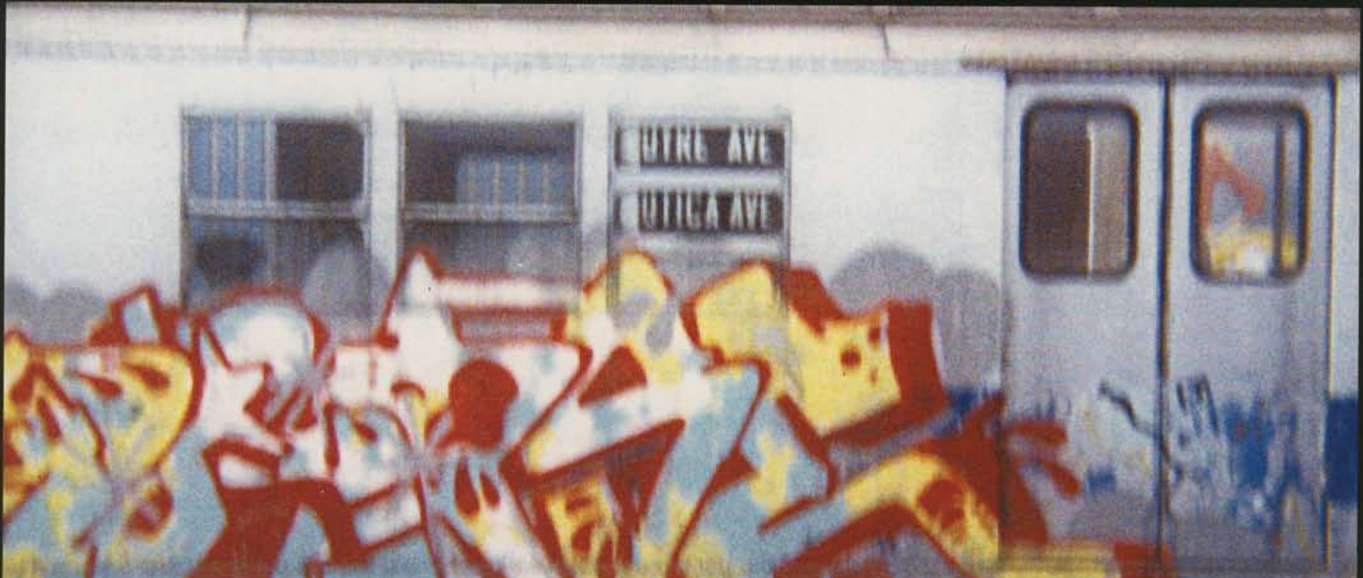
Prose 1979

Doc:
This "E" is phenomenal. I still do "E's" like that.

Daze:
To me, this piece is pretty transitional. He uses the "P", "R" and "E" from his PRE pieces. He did these types of names once in a blue moon.





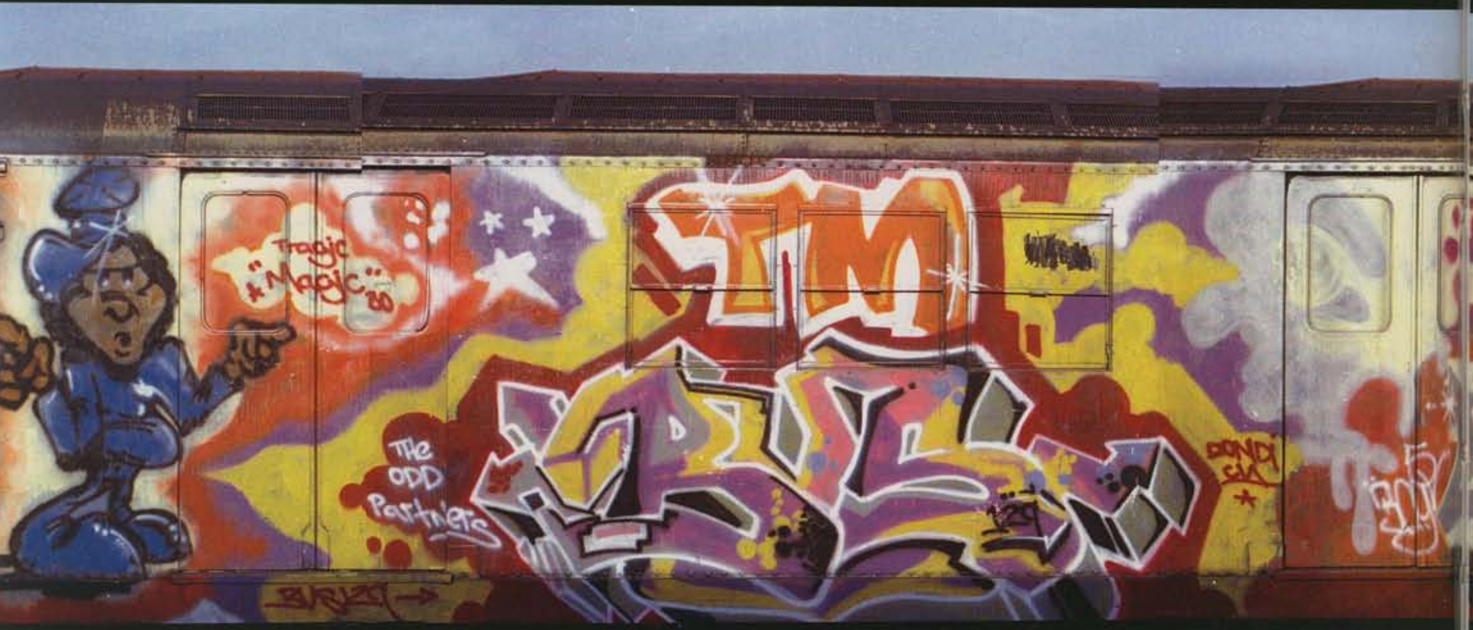

UTICA AVE
UTICA AVE

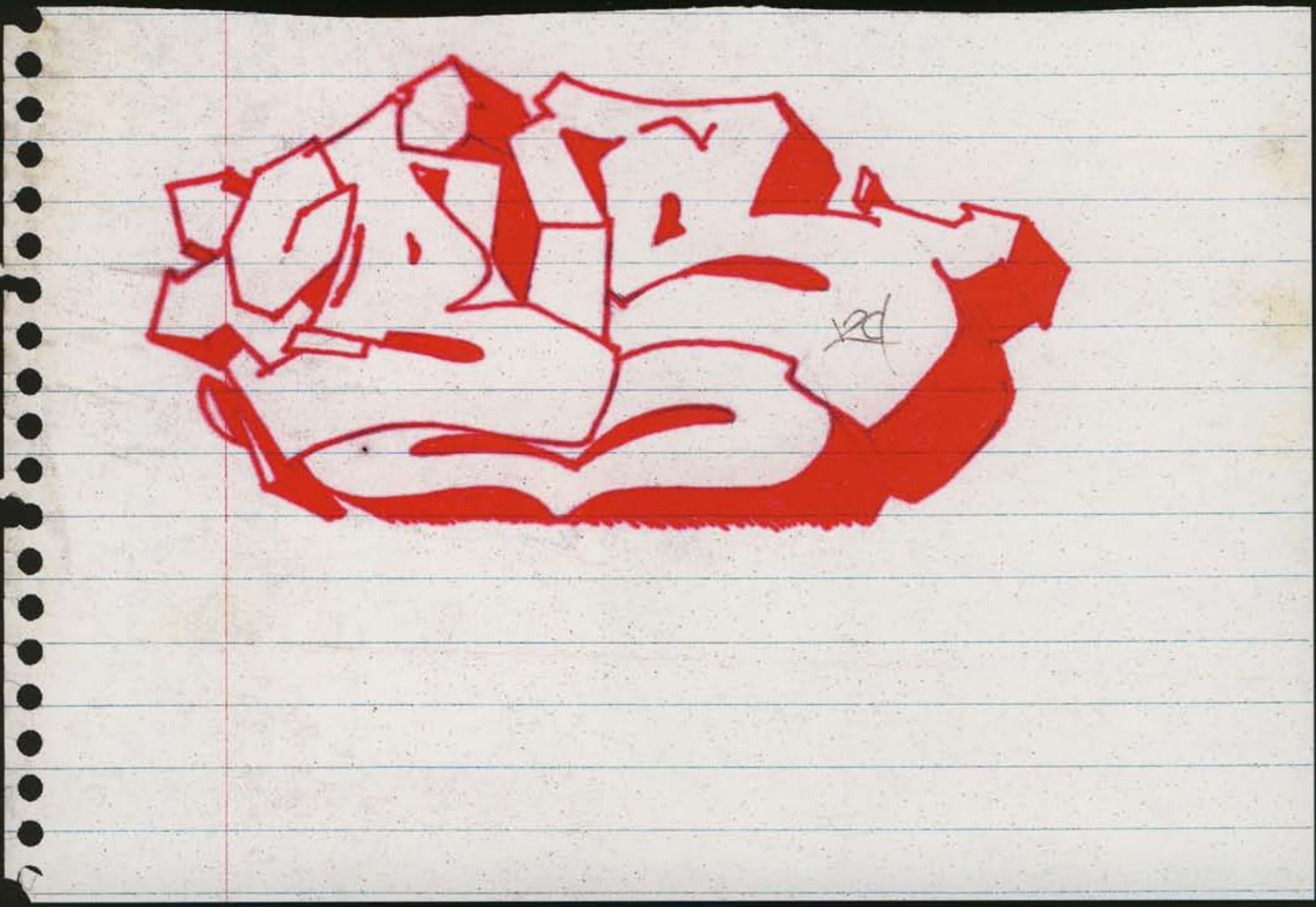
Bus + Boy 1980

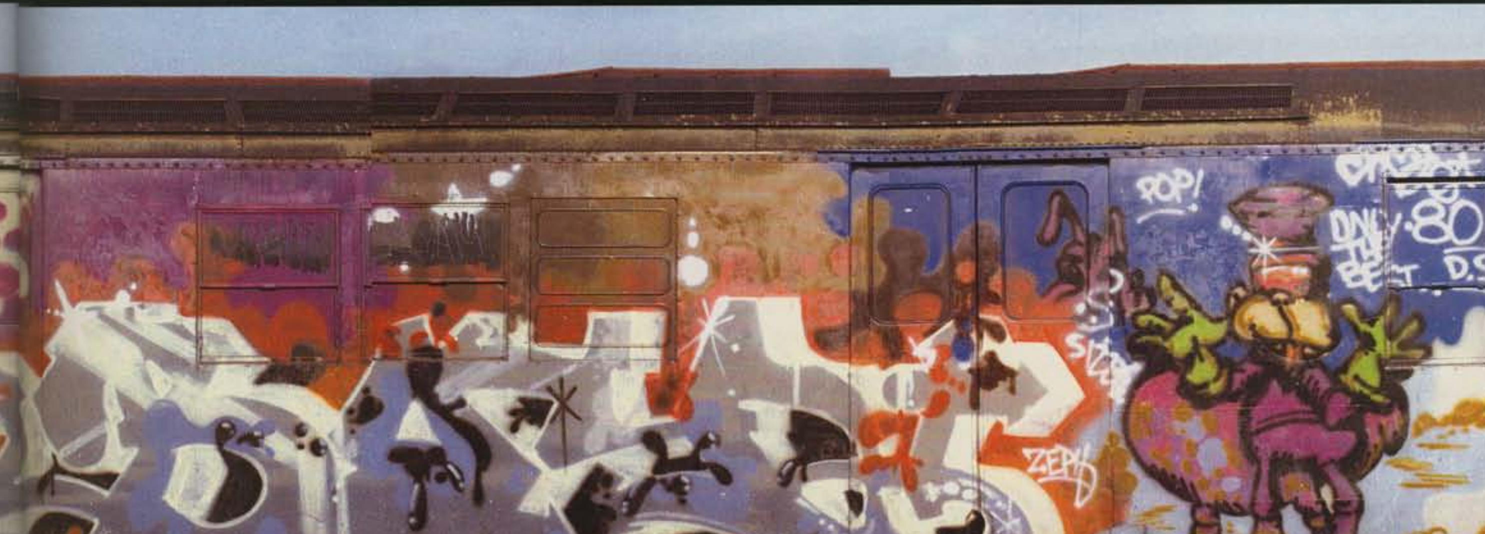
photo: Henry Chalfant

Dondi (Bus), Noc 167 (Boy 5)

Zephyr:
This car was done in the Utica tunnel in 1980. The BUS outline was by Slave and modified by Dondi. Even Dondi had to admit that Noc smoked him on this one. A lot of the paint for this car came from a huge rack-up that Noc and I did on the Woolworth's at Twenty-third Street. We slid the lock off the case and put all the paint into two suitcases with wheels. Then we just walked out the downstairs door that led right into the train station. It was sweet. We had paint all winter long.






POP!
ONLY THE BEST
80
D.S
ZEPH

Bus + Aeron 1979

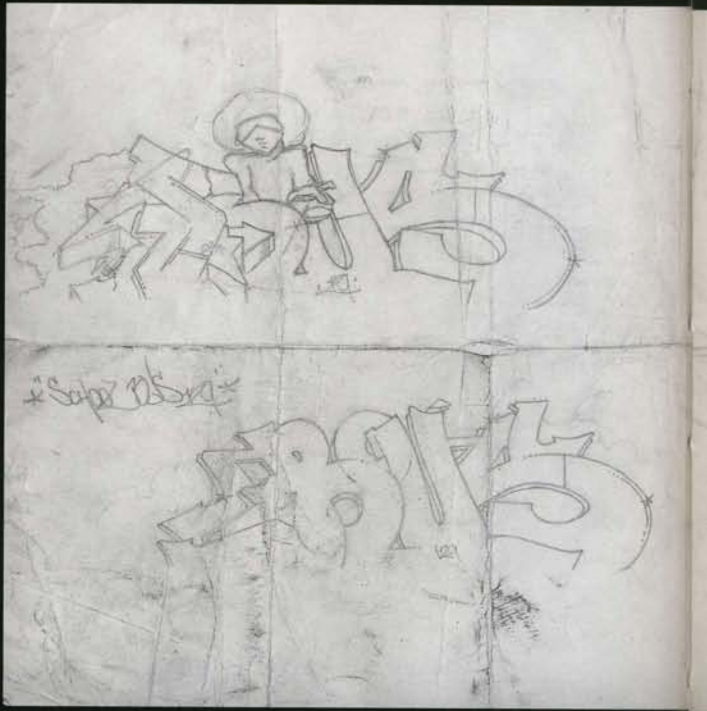
Dondi (Bus), Aeron

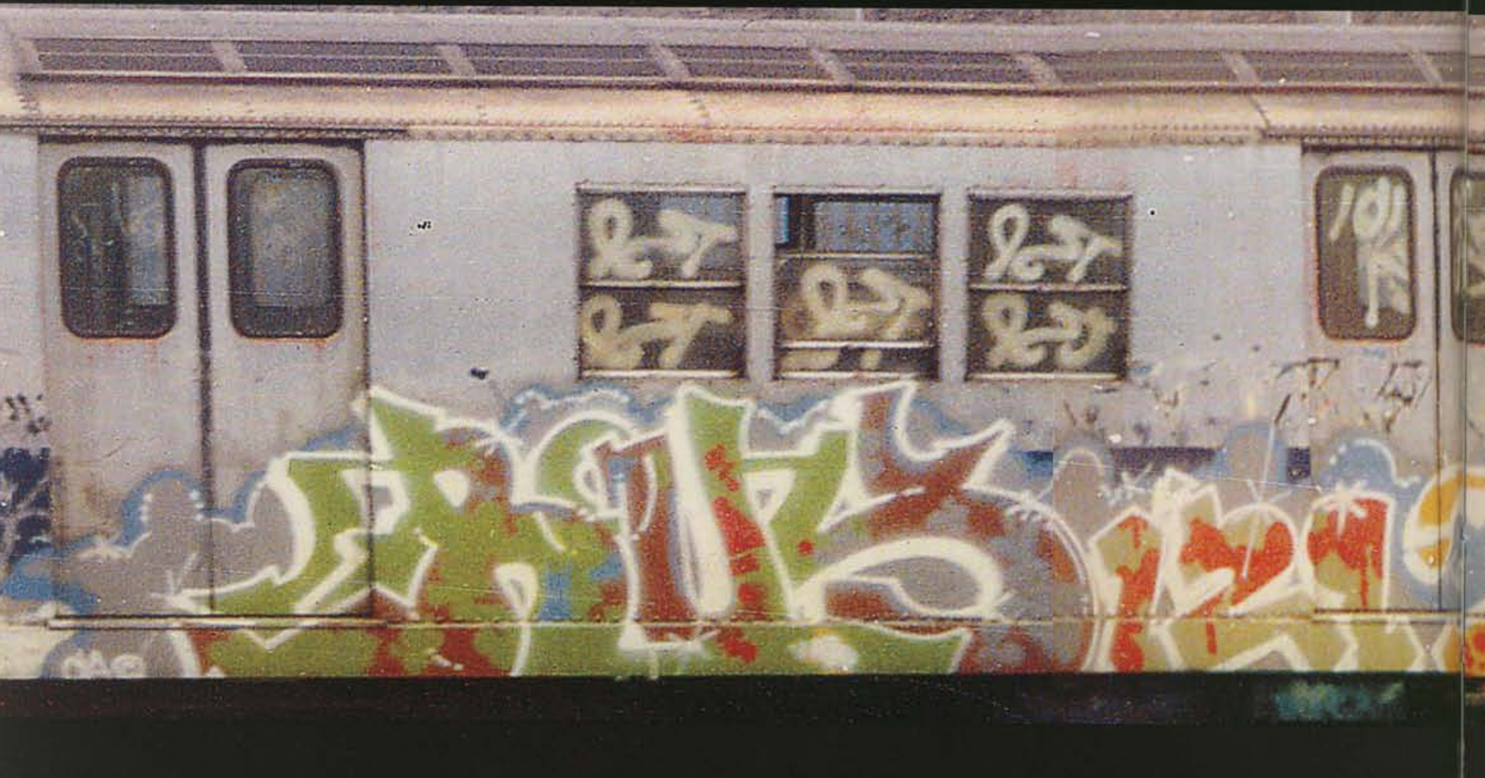
Duro:

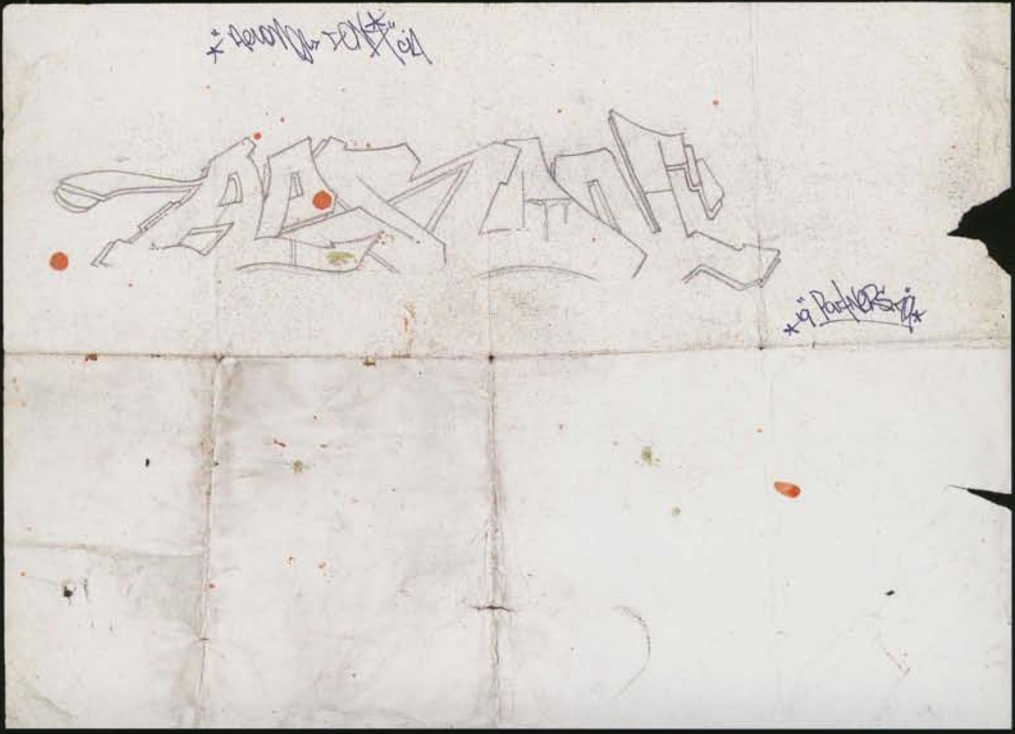
This was the first BUS AERON before the script one. Aeron kept saying he was up more than me, but he was only up on insides. So I said, let's race. We picked the CC's. It was no competition. I was the subway goblin.

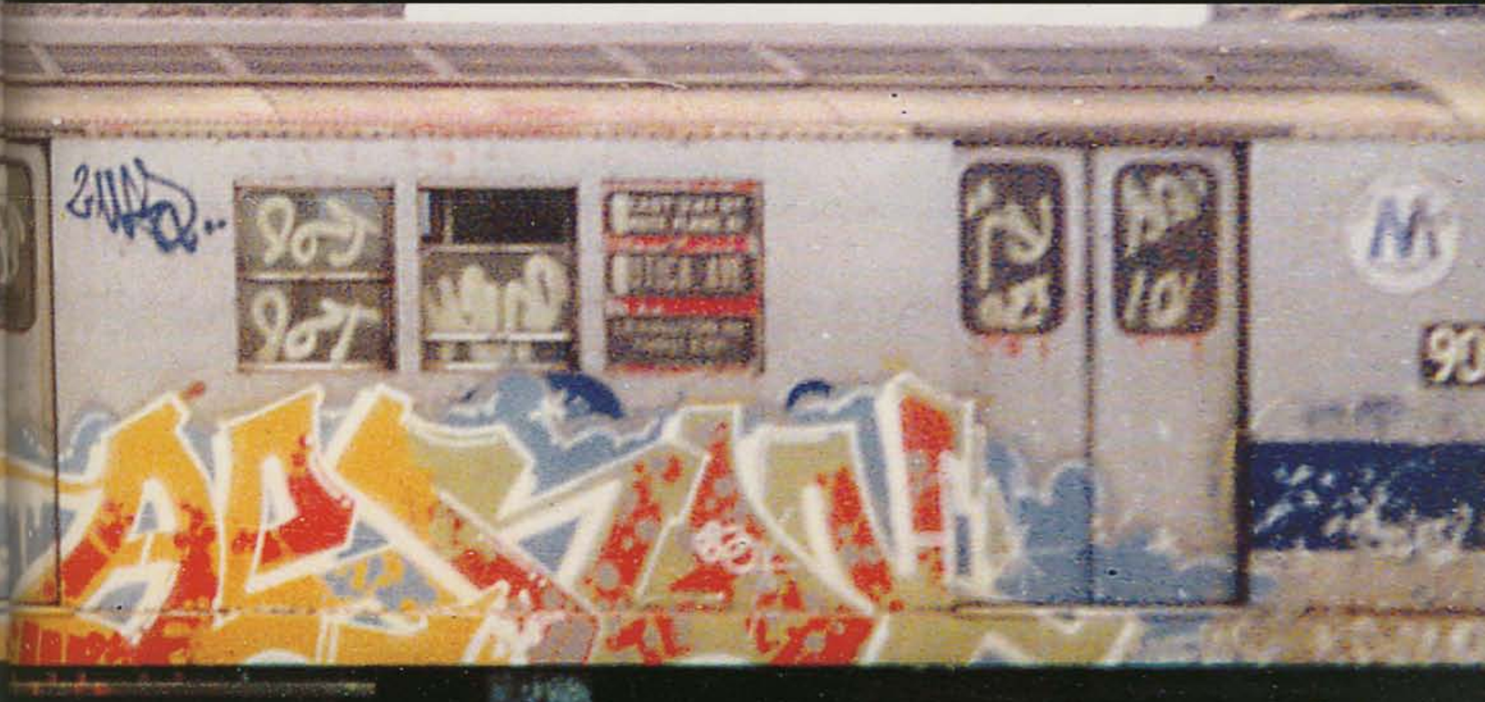
Doc:

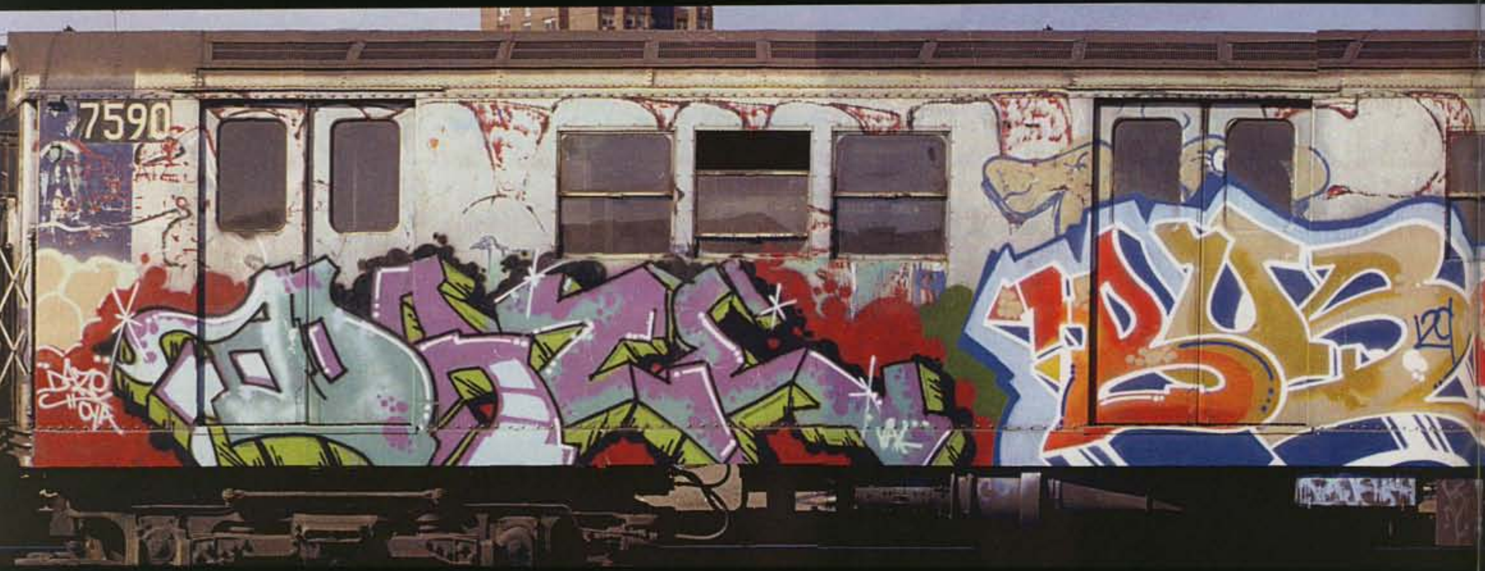
I love this one. It was phenomenal for him to even think that he could turn the "B" into an "8," and that people would understand it. Writers always worry about what people will say, but Dondi knew he could pull it off.







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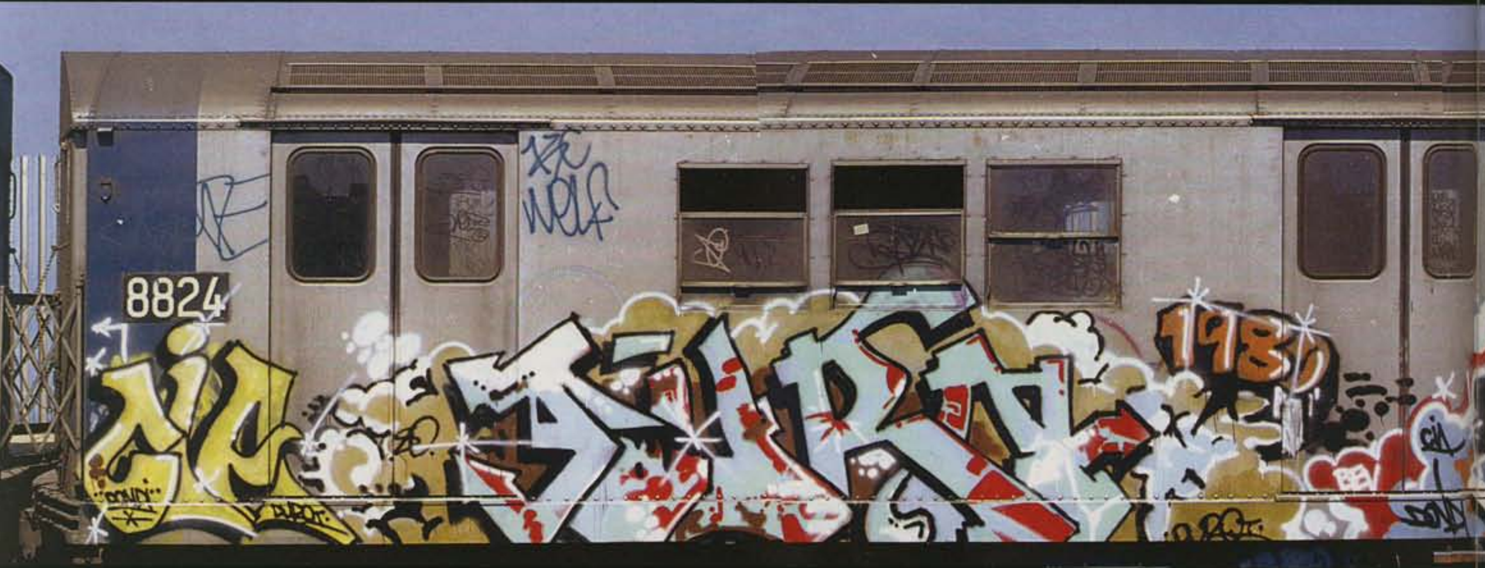
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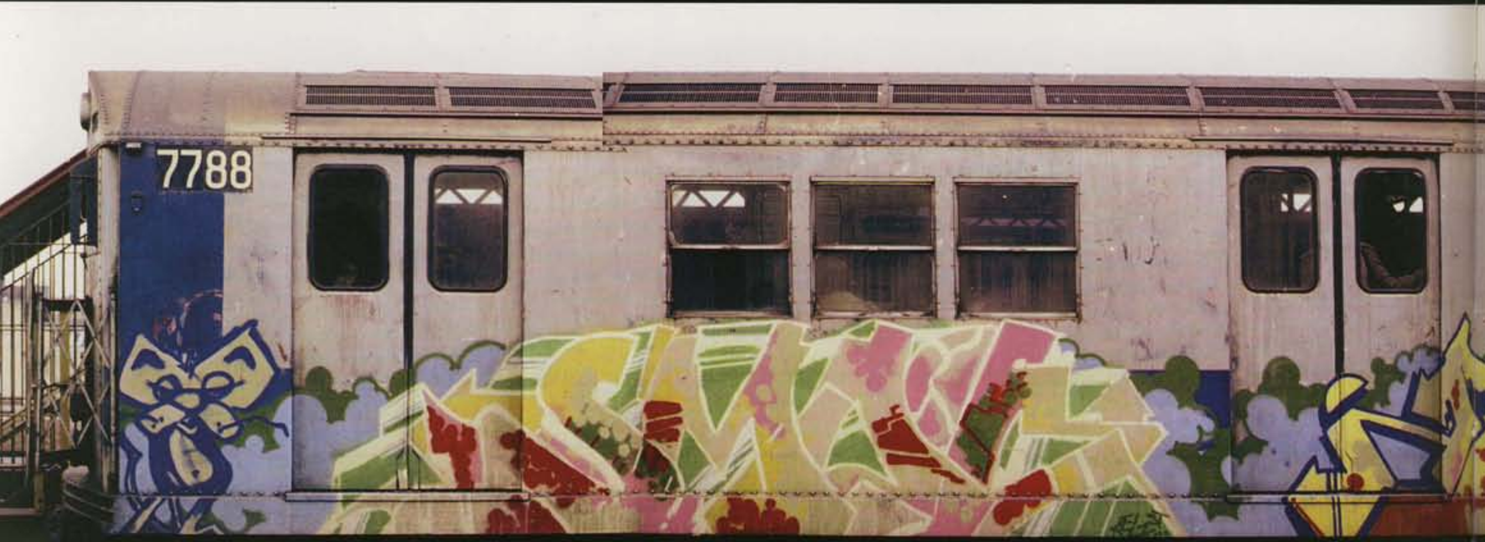
1980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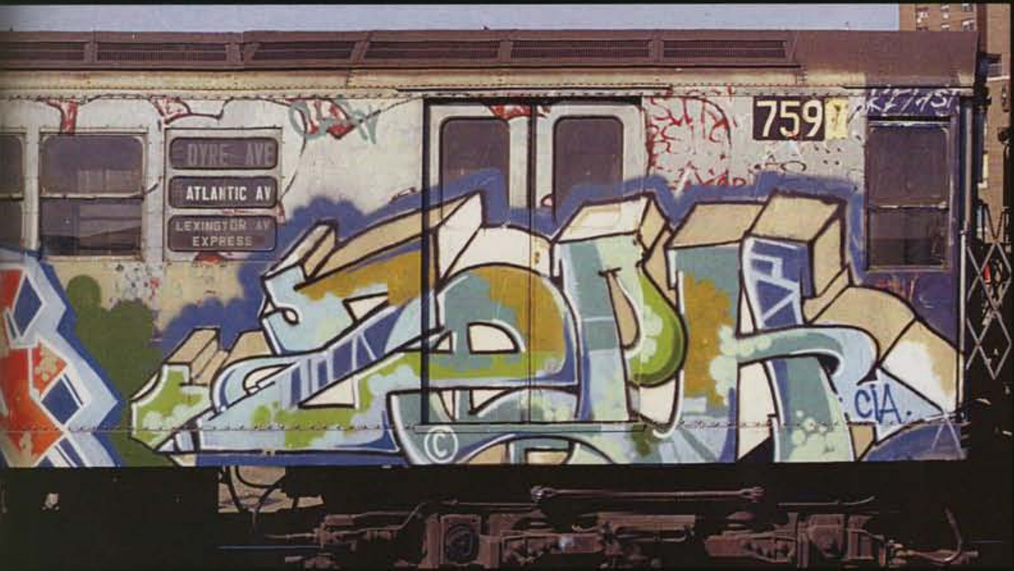
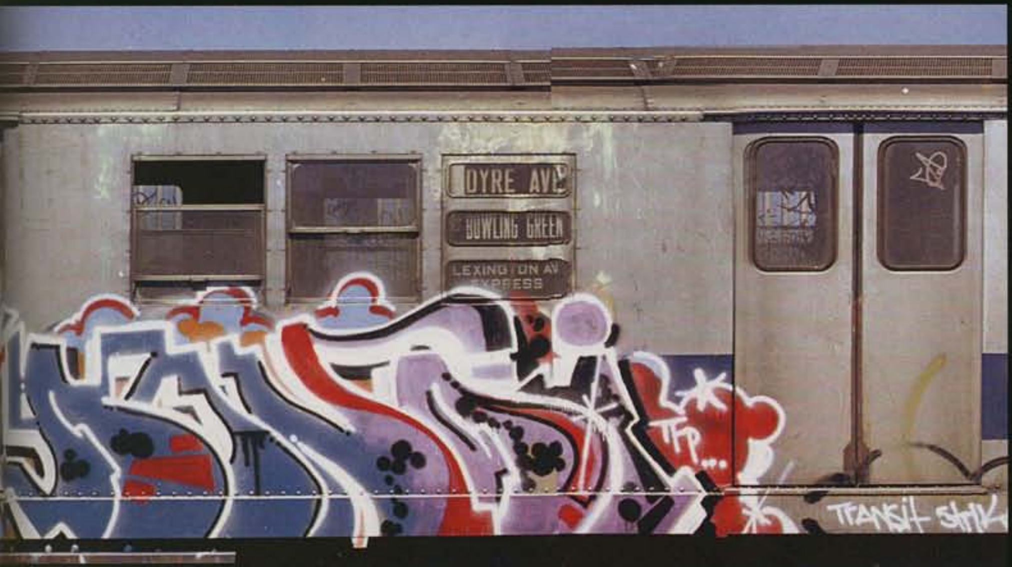

759
DYRE AVE
ATLANTIC AV
LEXINGTON AV EXPRESS
CIA

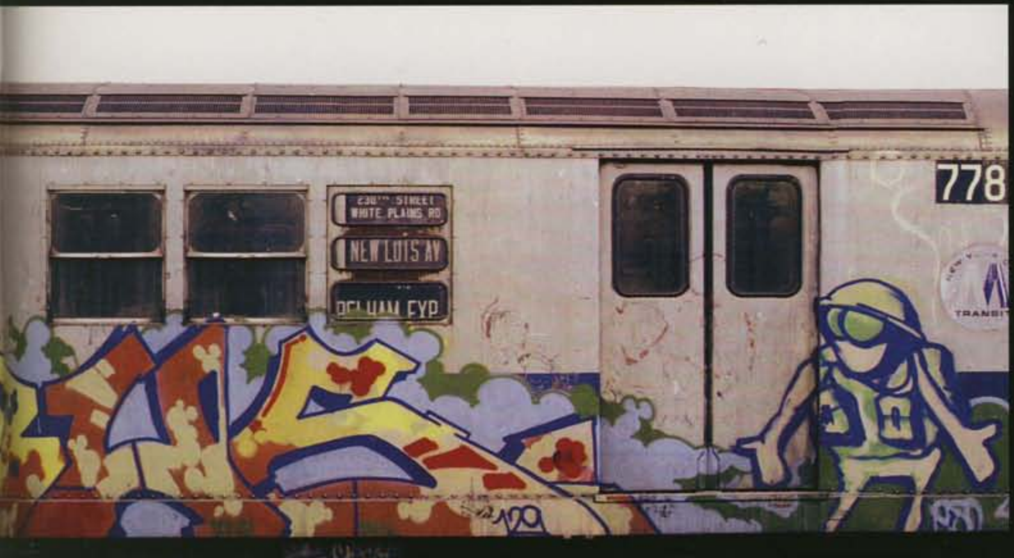
Daze + Bus + Zeph 1980
Daze, Dondi (Bus), Zephyr
photo: Henry Chalfant

Doc:
When I was about fifteen, I decided I was going to quit. My friend gave me a picture of this piece and said, "Can you paint like this?" It was so perfect–so simple, but saying so much. I wanted to paint that well–my retirement was off. I was never the same after I saw this BUS piece. This was it. If it wasn't for this piece, I would have quit.


DYRE AVE
BOWLING GREEN
LEXINGTON AV EXPRESS
TFP...
Transit Strik

Duro + Dondi 1980
photo: Henry Chalfant

Duro:
This was painted on the tenth day of the NYC transit strike. Dondi gave me the vice presidency of CIA that night.


778
238TH STREET WHITE PLAINS RD
NEW LOTS AV
PELHAM EXP

Smog + Bus 1980
Kel (Smog), Dondi (Bus)
photo: Henry Chalfant

Kel:
I called Dondi and told him I had a new tag, BUS 139. Coincidentally, he had just done a BUS piece, so on this car we decided to switch names. I used Dondi's name SMOG, which was a rebuttle to Noc's PHOG piece on the No. 1 train.

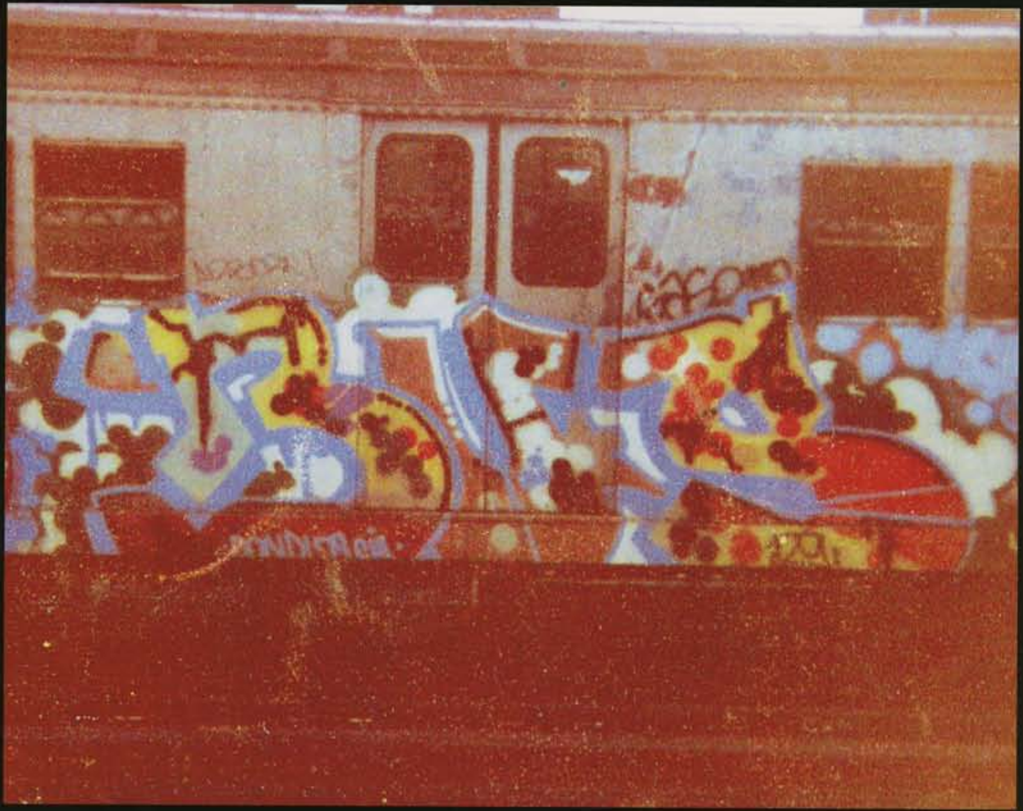
Bus 1980

Duro + Bus + Kid

Duro, Dondi (Bus), Kid

Duro:

We did this one in the 1 tunnel. Good old Broadway. We went with Dr. Pepper and Deli 167 (Ban2) to do this. After we finished the car, Fed2 took a tag on the top of the train. Dondi, Aeron, and Kid wanted some beer, so Alive made his cousin to go get it.



Bus 129 + Aeron 1980

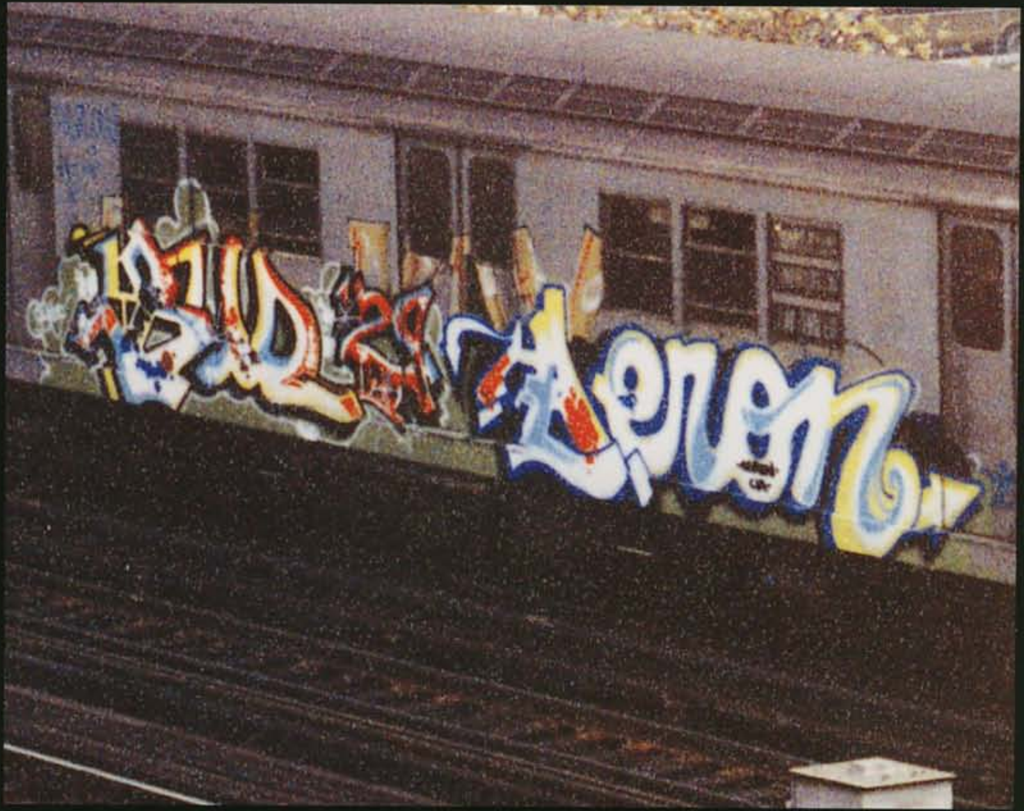
Dondi (Bus), Aeron

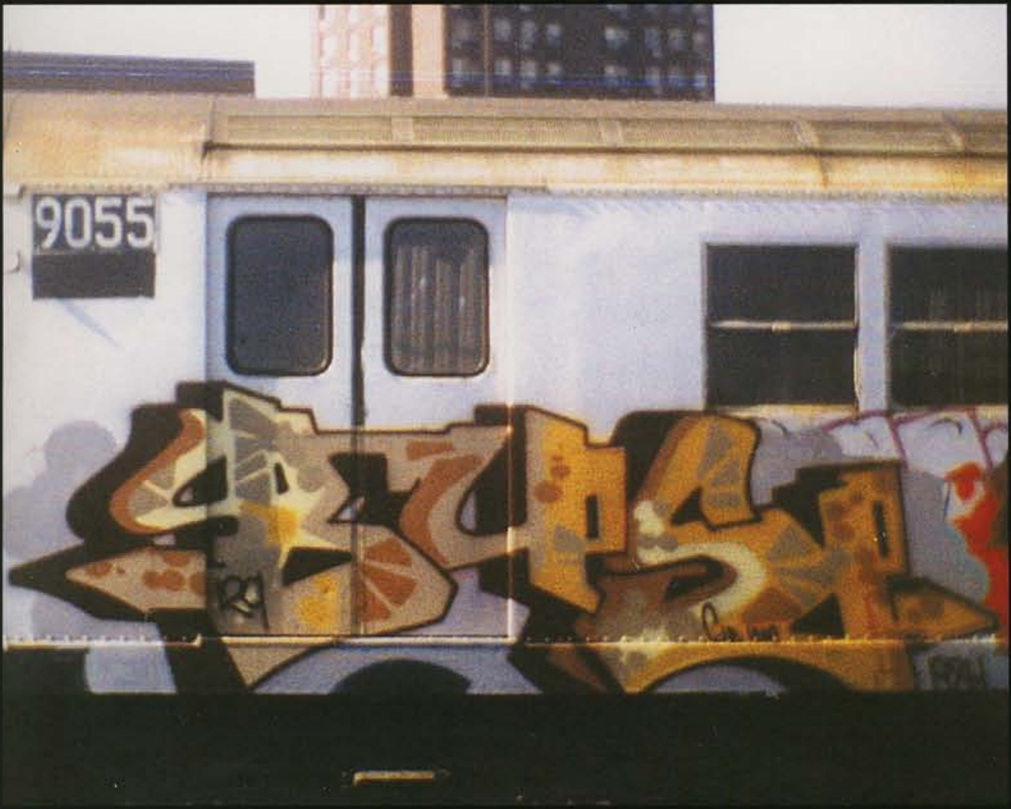
Duro:

I didn't like this piece. This was one of those days he burned himself. Writers often wind up doing other people's names better than their own. Dondi nailed the AERON here, but I think he missed with the BUS.

Zephyr:

Also done in Utica. Rasta and Slave did the BLOOD-WISH car that night and I did a ZEPHYR MAFIA piece. We were still using paint from the Woolworth's heist.

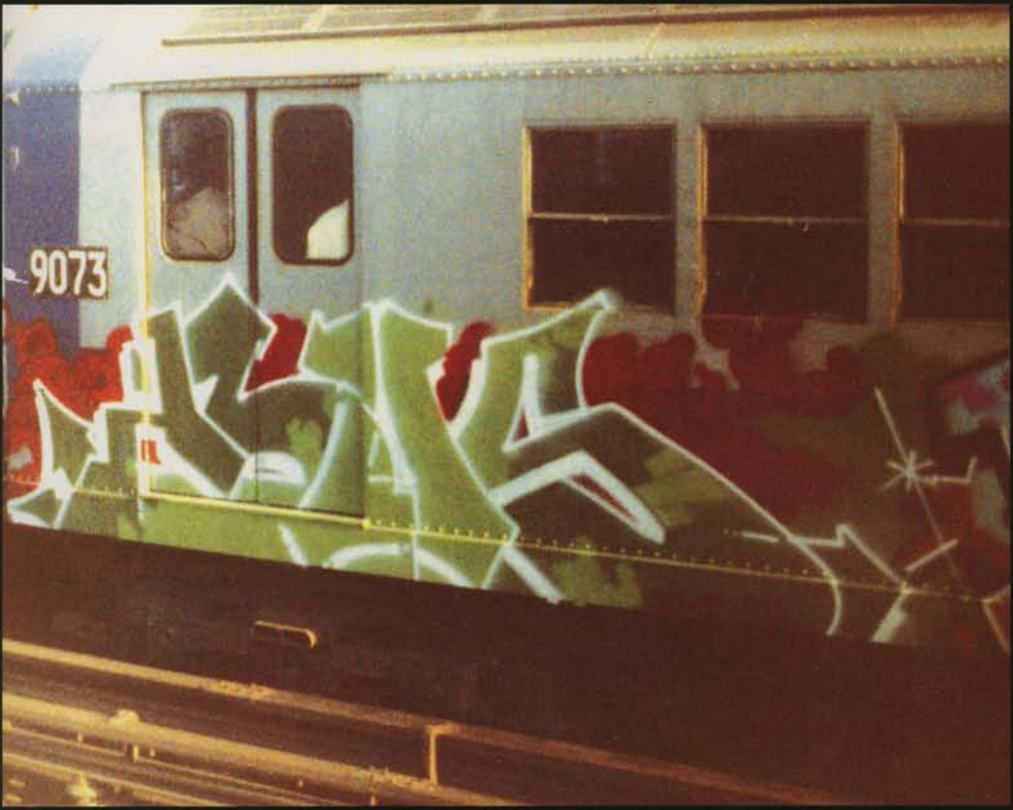




Bus 1984

Bus + Kado + Scrap
Dondi (Bus), Kado, Scrap

Doc:
I know how long it took him to do this—it's fast and simple. The long curvy lines that he blocked the pieces with he called "squiggums." He would always paint the light line first, and then cut into it to make it perfect. When he was done, you couldn't tell which lines had come first. He knew where to be minimal and where to be extra. It was a gift.



Bus 1980

Bus + Duro + Kid
Dondi (Bus), Duro, Kid

Kel:
This came out as soon as Dondi and I met—right after the first DURO and KID piece—maybe two months later. This was the second BUS piece Dondi ever did.

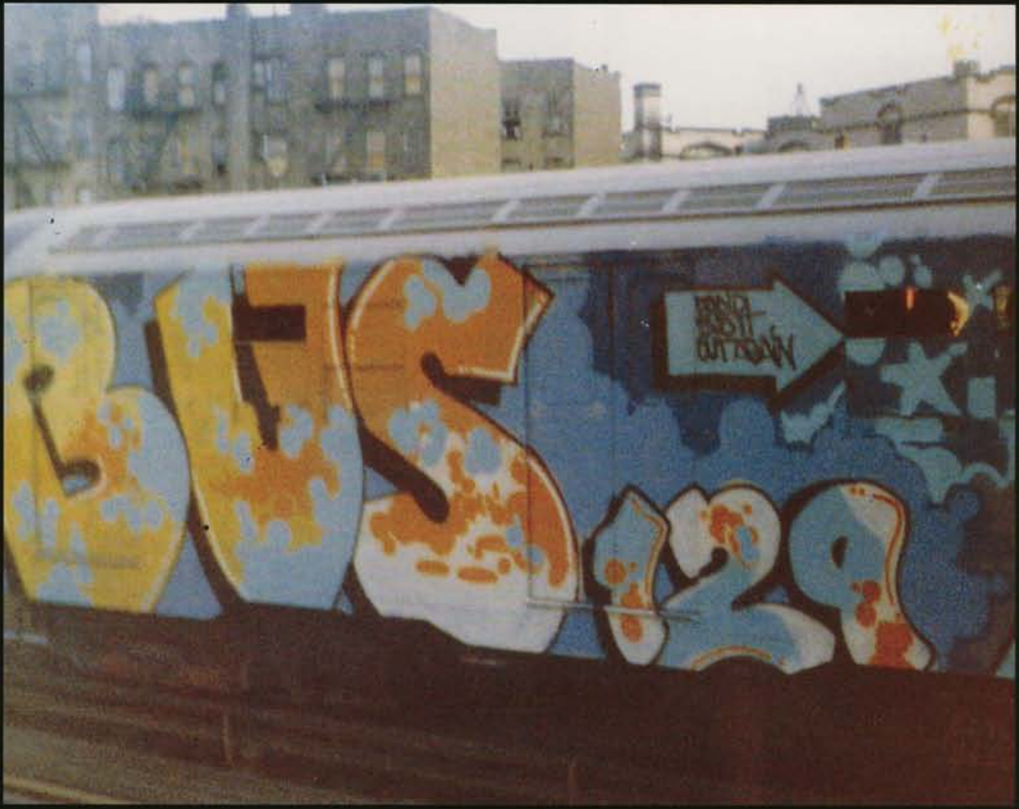
Duro:
This was the same night we did the CODE top to bottom.

Spar:
Dondi knocked out all the outlines on this car.

Bus 129 1979

Bus 129 + Duro
Dondi (Bus), Duro

Duro:
This was Dondi's first BUS piece. We did this in Lane 25 of the J Yard. This whole car was Dondi's first piece after he came back from his "retirement." It was me, Kist, Rasta, Eddie, Shasta, Nina, Mama, and Baby. They were all doing throw-ups. At this time, not a lot of writers were going to the J Yard, but we knew who the cops were from scoping out the Burger King nearby, so we knew when it was clear to go in.

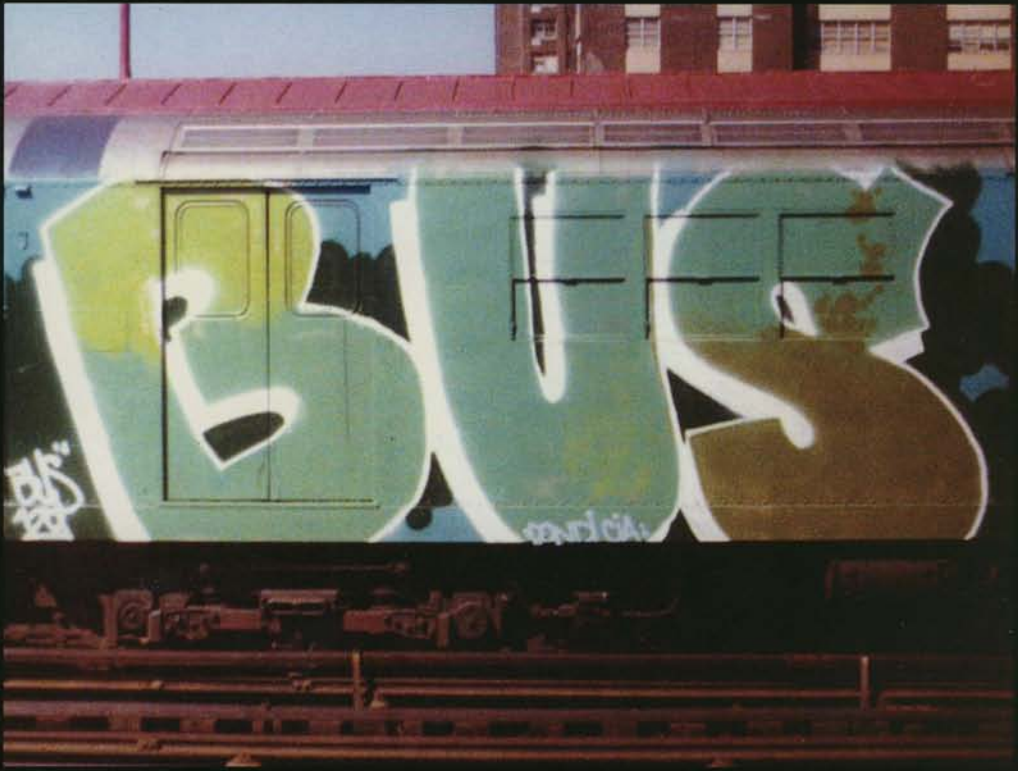


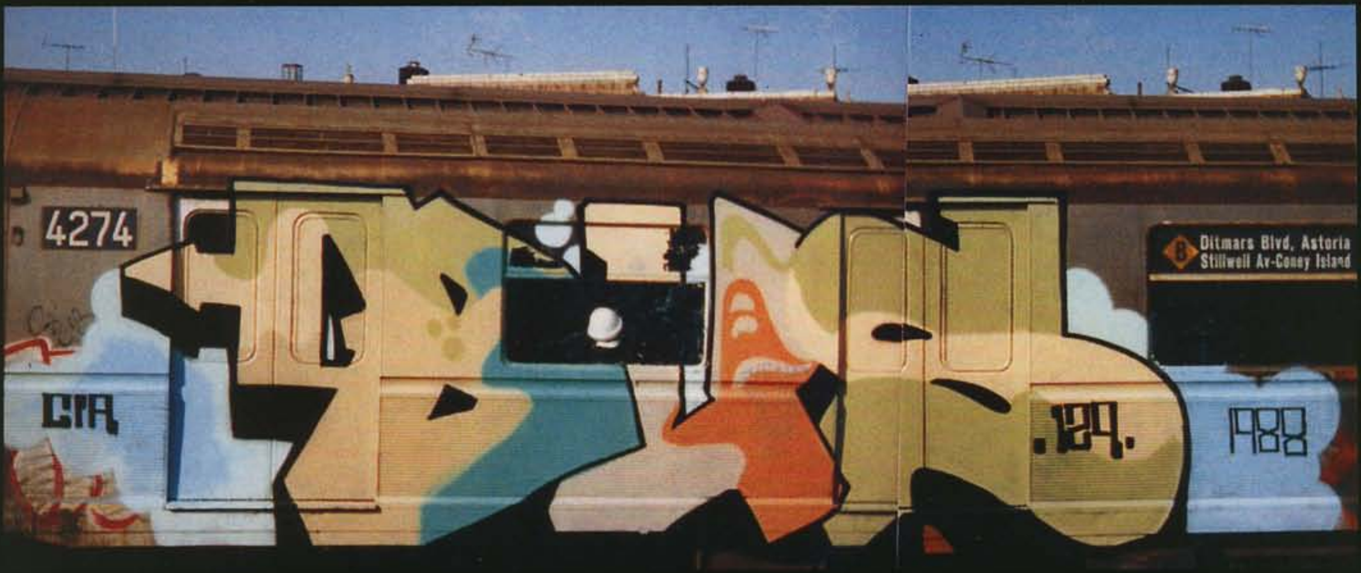
Bus 1980

Bus + Eric
Dondi (Bus), Deal (Eric)
photo: Henry Chalfant

Eric (Deal):
I told Dondi that I had a lot of paint and we went to Utica. Duro was with us. When the piece was done he wrote "From the big U" in his "U," an inside reference to Utica. Then he realized that the vandal squad might understand the joke and figure out that we painted it in Utica, so he covered it up.

Daze:
To me this was interesting because he deliberately left out design and arrows and showed the BUS in its most basic form.





The End of an Era—Dondi's Last Subway, November 1988

New York's subway-painting movement lasted nearly two decades. Its "official" demise came in late 1989, when the Metropolitan Transit Authority publicly announced its victory in the "war" on subway graffiti. The announcement came at a well-choreographed press conference at the 207th Street Yard in the Bronx. There, on May 12, 1989, in front of a phalanx of reporters, "the last graffiti train" was painted over.

To this day, pieces continue to be executed on New York subways, but painted trains are rarely seen by the public. Transit Authority policy requires that painted trains be immediately pulled from service and cleaned.

Throughout his writing career, Dondi derived great satisfaction from coaching other artists. Over a ten-year period, Dondi helped a number of writers develop their own styles. With his uncanny ability to identify the strengths and abilities of others, he was able to help his apprentices develop very quickly. But Dondi was very particular about who he shared ideas with and limited his mentoring to those with whom he felt a special bond.

Of all the writers that Dondi took under his wing, the one he shared the closest aesthetic connection with was a fellow Brooklyn-based writer named DOC. Dondi and DOC had a very tight bond that formed in 1983 and remained strong until the end. It is significant that Dondi painted his final train with his "number-one son," as it represented a symbolic "passing of the torch."

In November 1988, Dondi, MAGOO 2, and DOC painted three whole cars on the B line. The appearance of a brand new BUS top-to-bottom in late 1988 created a wave of excitement throughout the writing community. Dondi White, the Style Master General, had done it again—proving that you should never turn your back on a sleeping giant.

Bus 129 1988

Doc:

This was a funny night. It was supposed to be an ARAB and BUS whole car. When we got there, there were no flats. Dondi said "I'm not doing any styles on no ridges". He didn't want his last train to be a ridgy. So he did this, off the top of his head, with no sketches. When he finished, we were leaving the tunnel and Dondi just vanished. You have to climb up a lot of flights to get back up to the street. But he just disappeared. When we got to my car, he was in the back seat, all huddled up. When I asked him how he got in my car, he just said "I know Hondas."

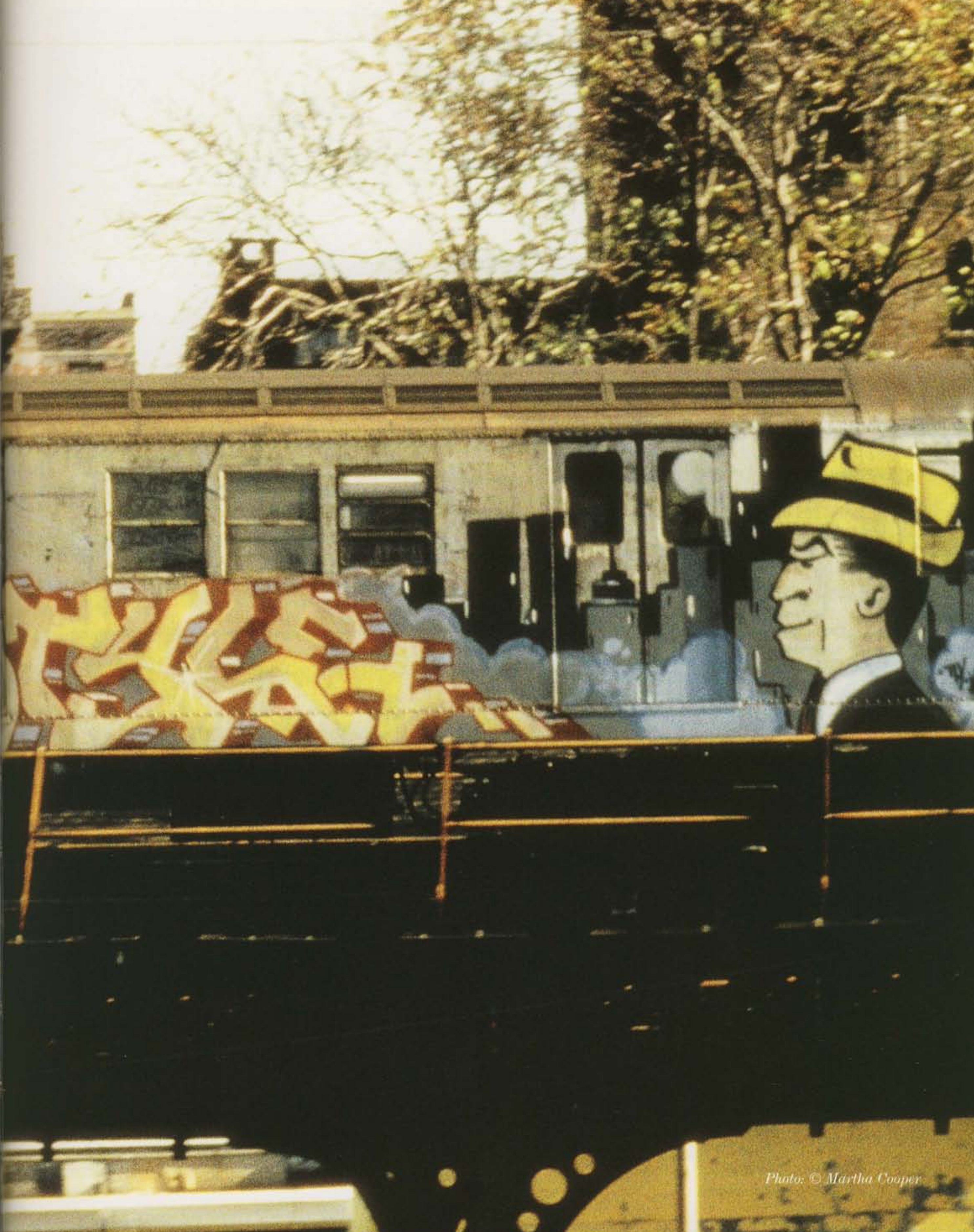
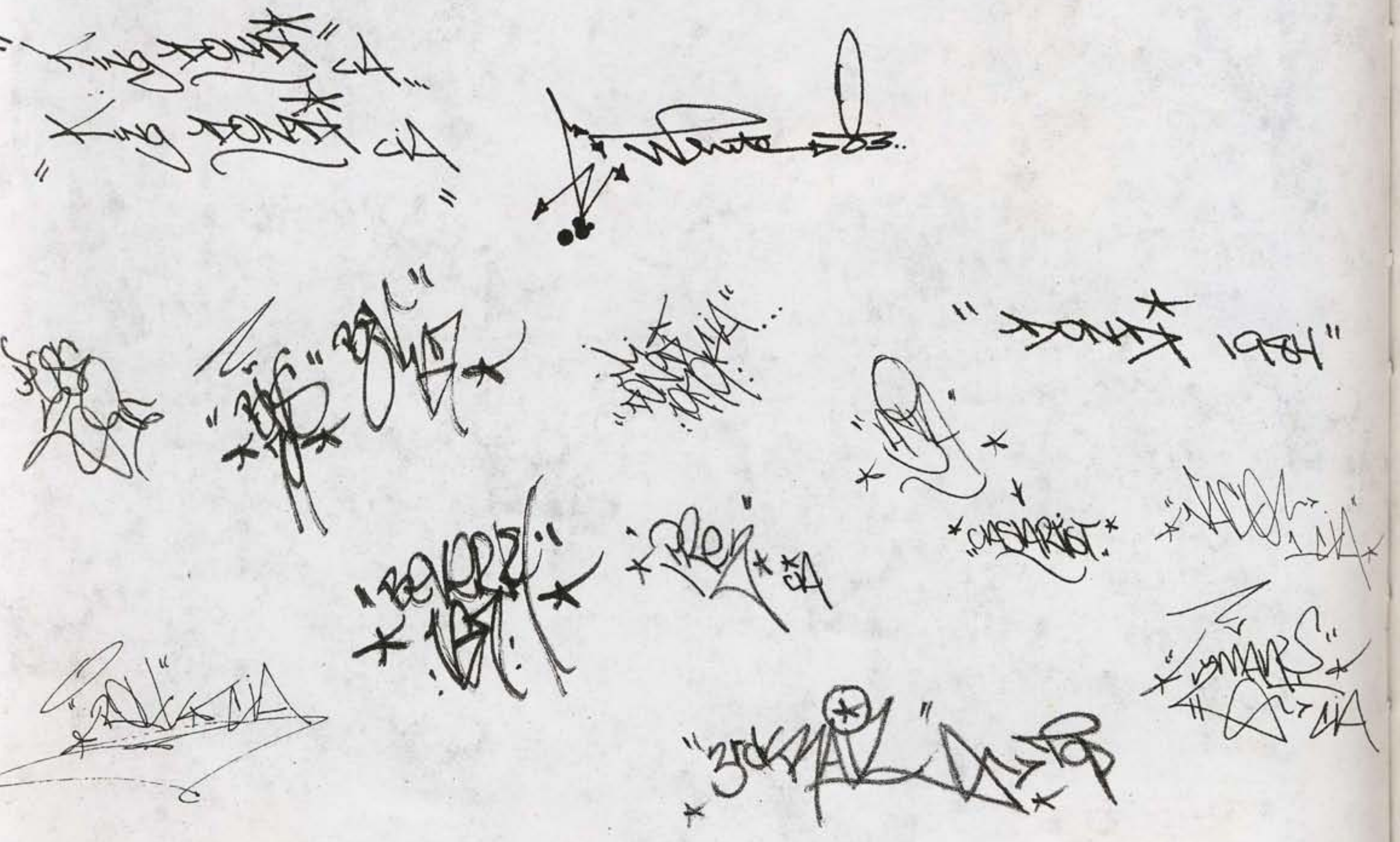


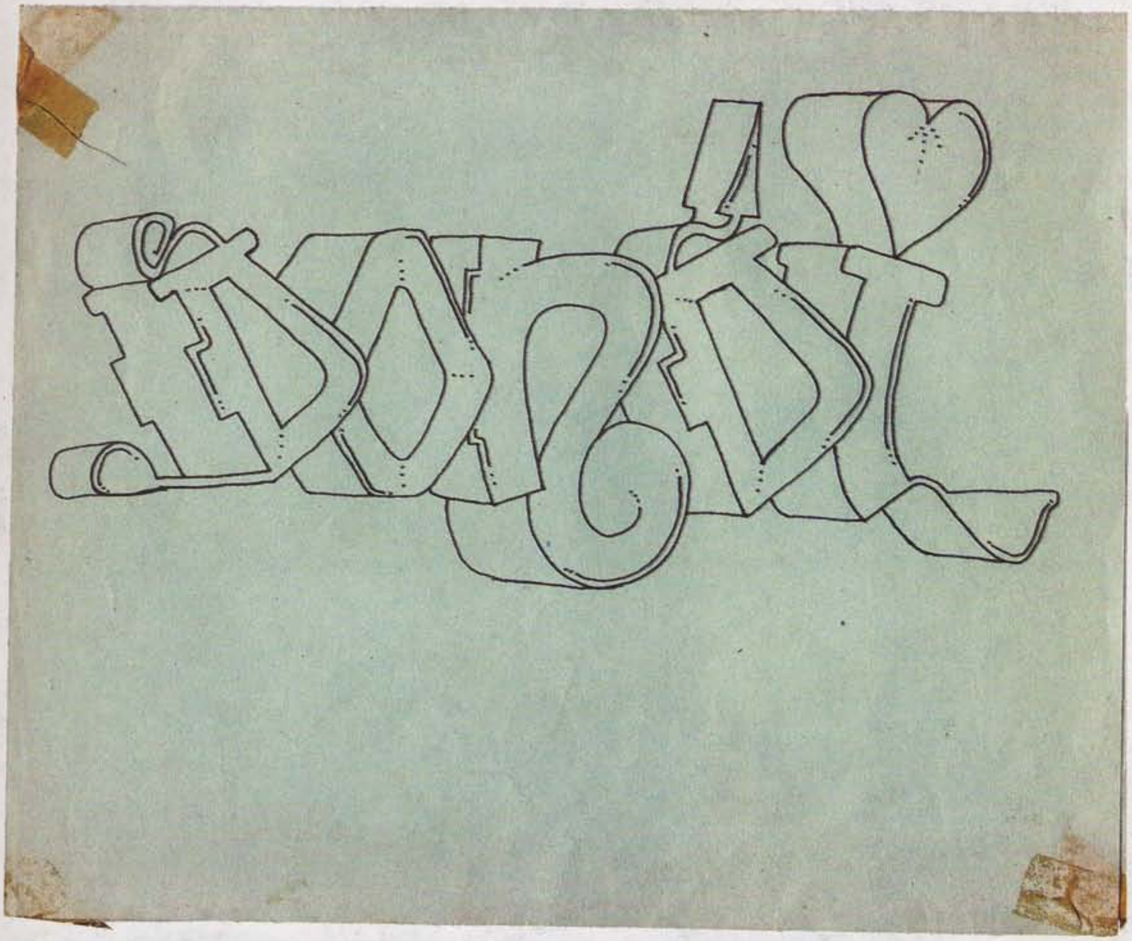
Photo: © Martha Cooper

SKETCHES

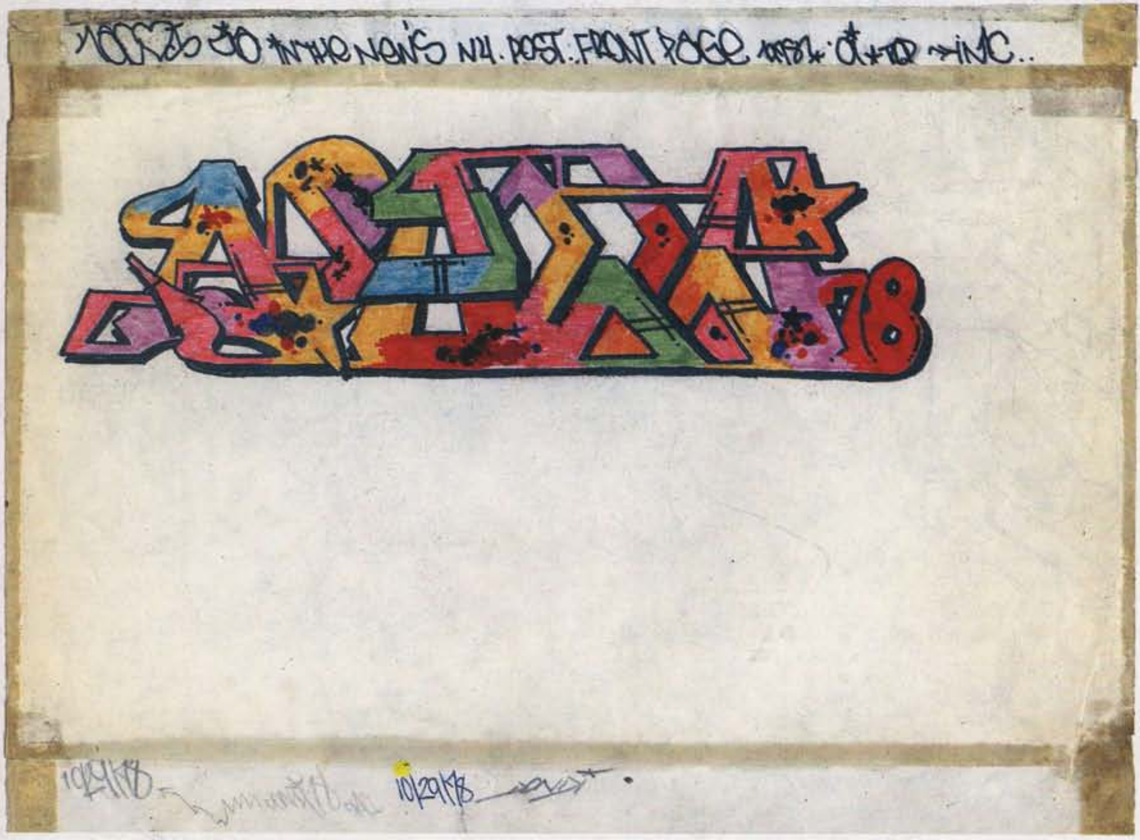
Dondi's approach to piecing was very straightforward. He designed highly detailed outlines, accumulated the paint and executed his pieces on the trains. An added benefit of his reputation was having dedicated members of his crew who helped "requisition" paint supplies. The vast majority of Dondi's work on the trains was carefully planned, while a smaller number of his pieces were spontaneous renderings, culled from his imagination.

The drawings in this section fall into three general categories: sketches that became train pieces; sketches that were plans for train pieces but for various reasons never executed; and finally, outlines that were done simply "for style's sake."





Dondi 1977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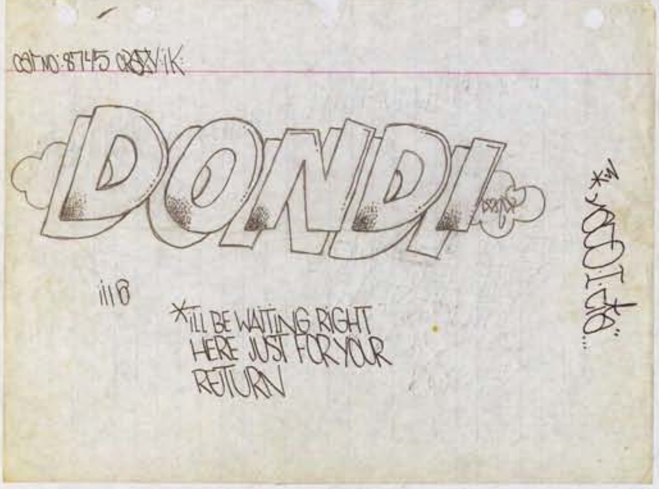
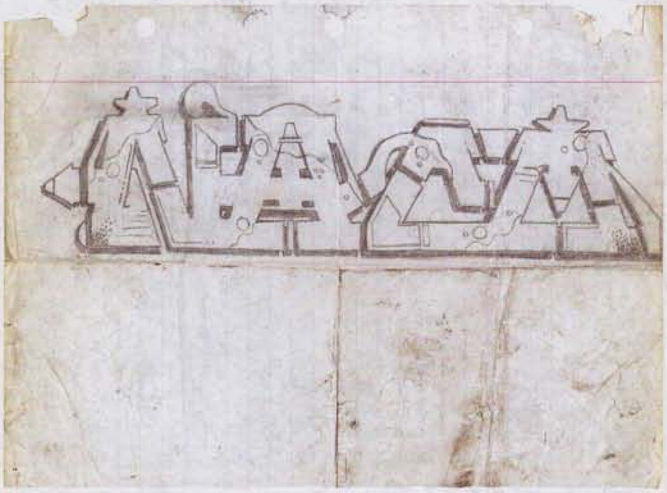
Naco 1978


DONDI
*ILL BE WAITING RIGHT HERE JUST FOR YOUR RETURN

Dondi 1978



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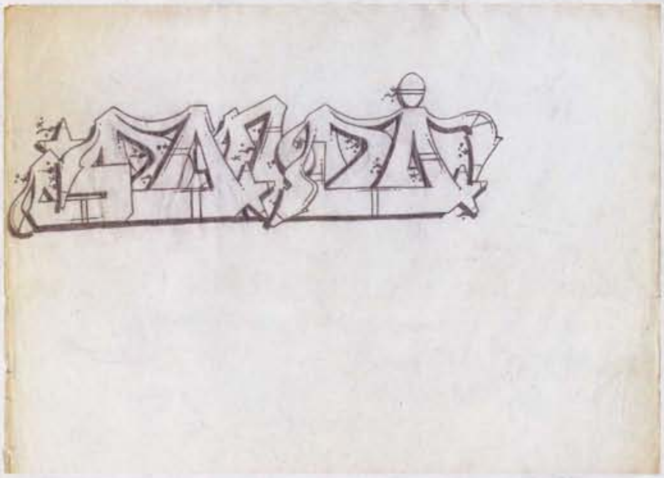
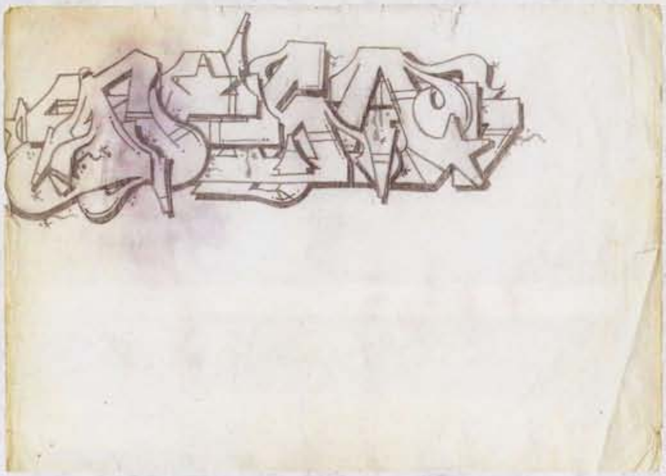


Dondi 1978



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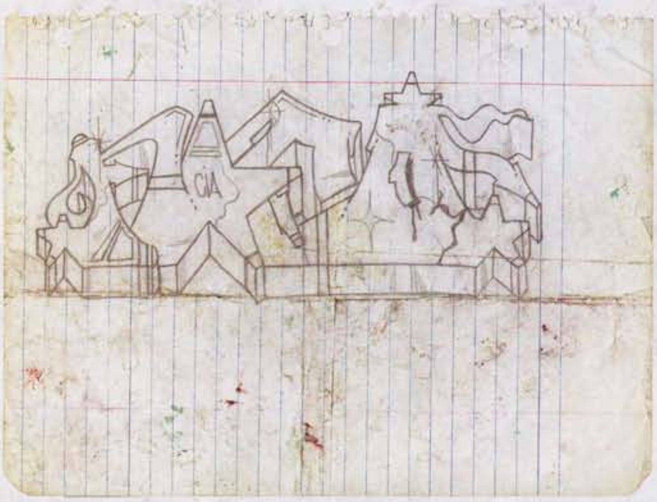

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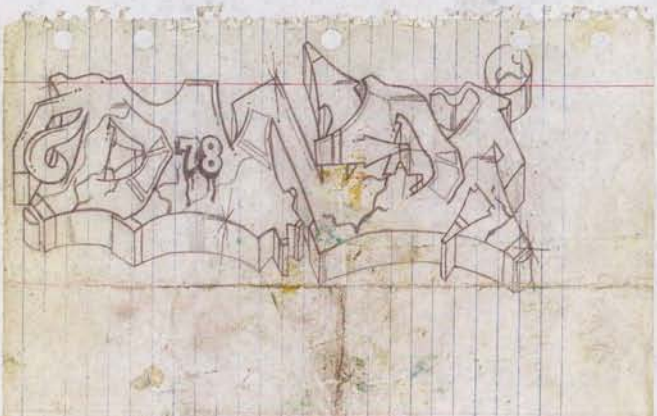
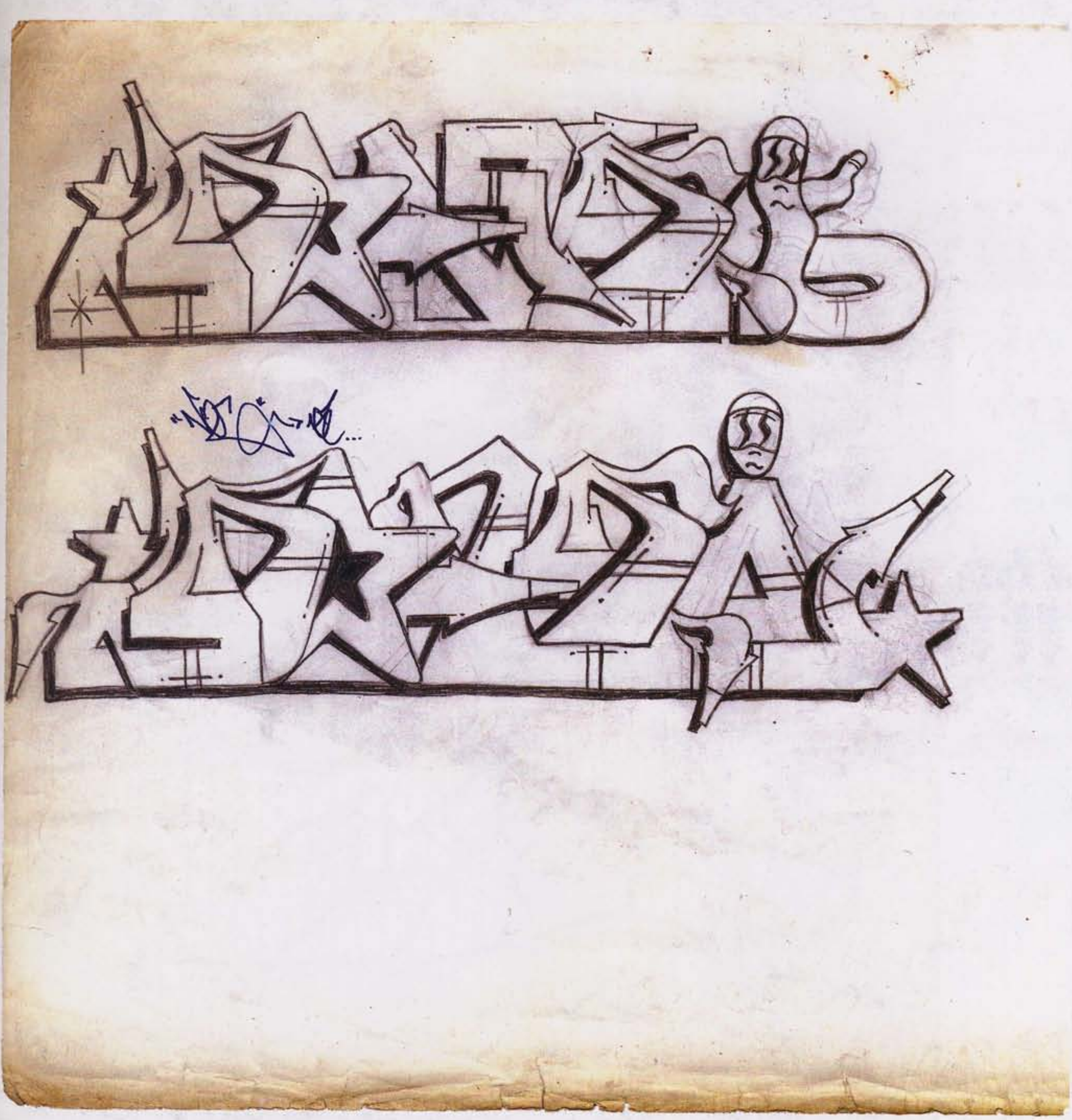
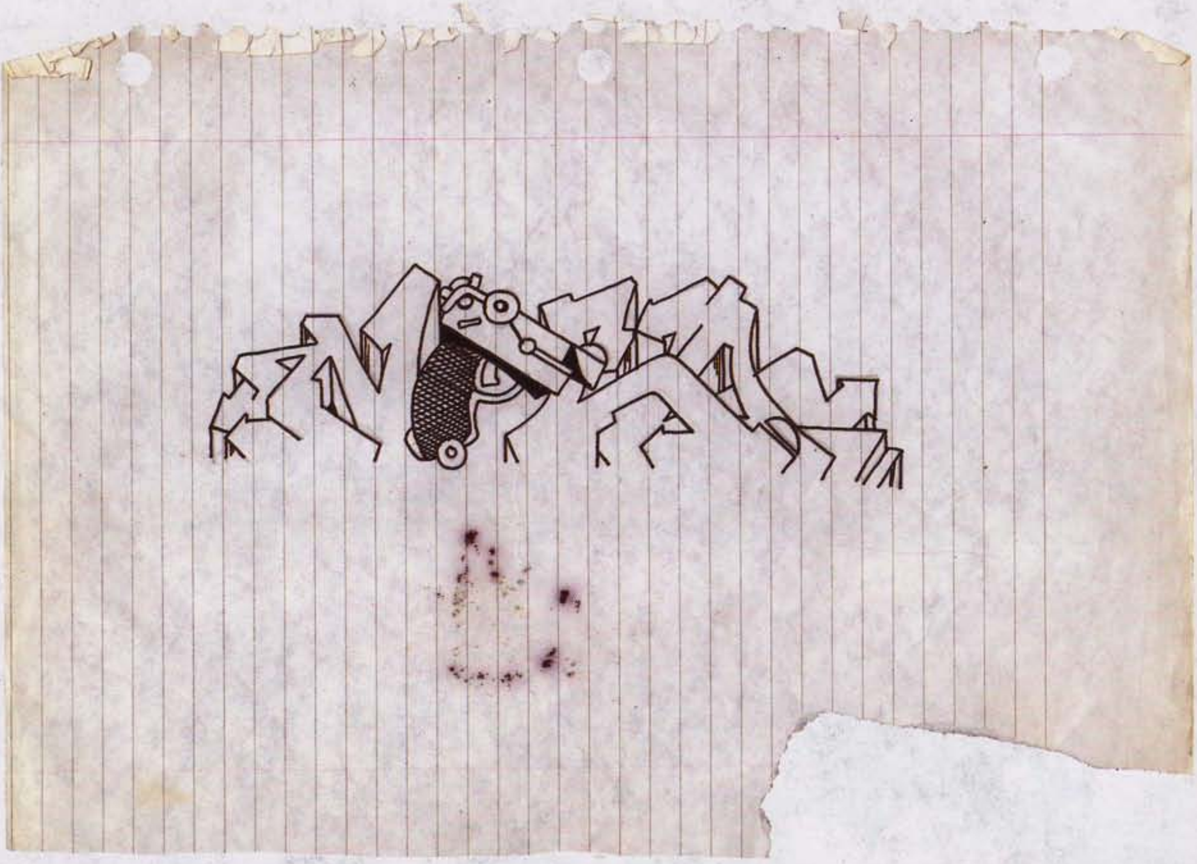


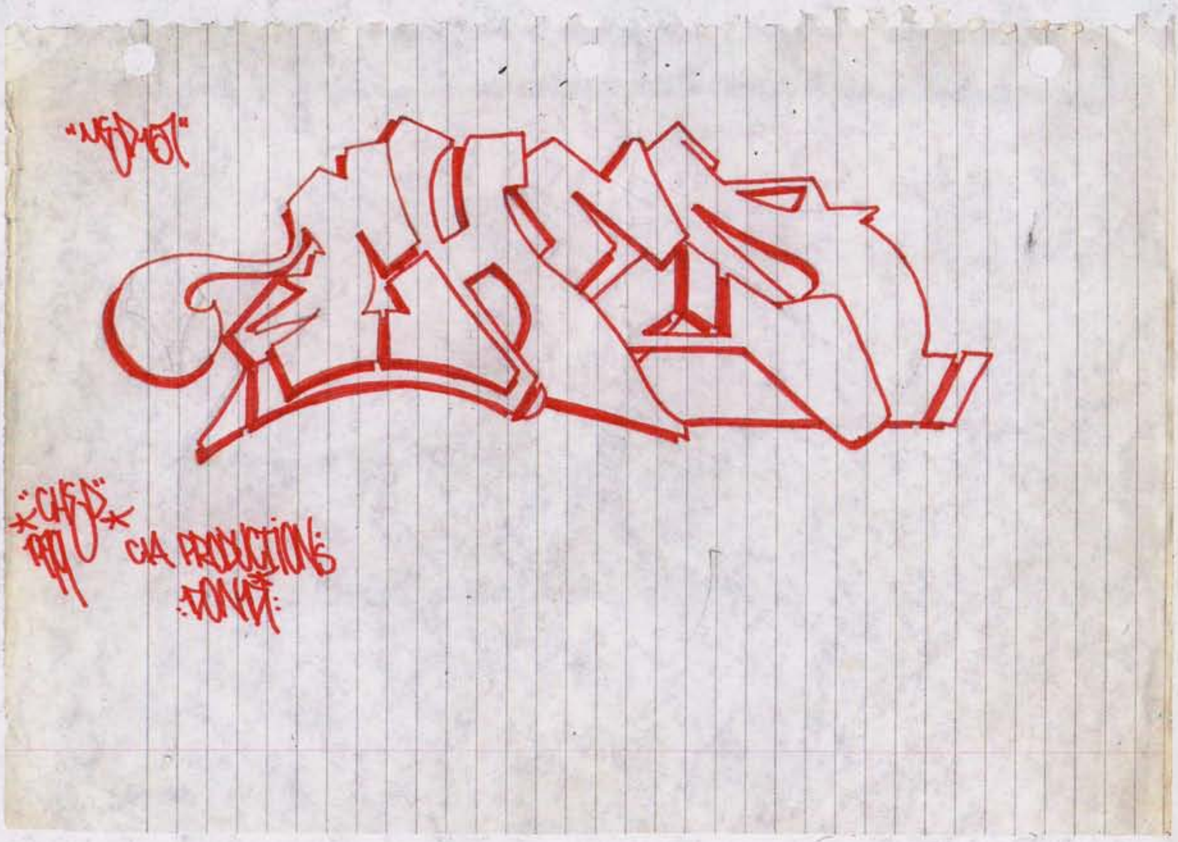
Dondi 1978



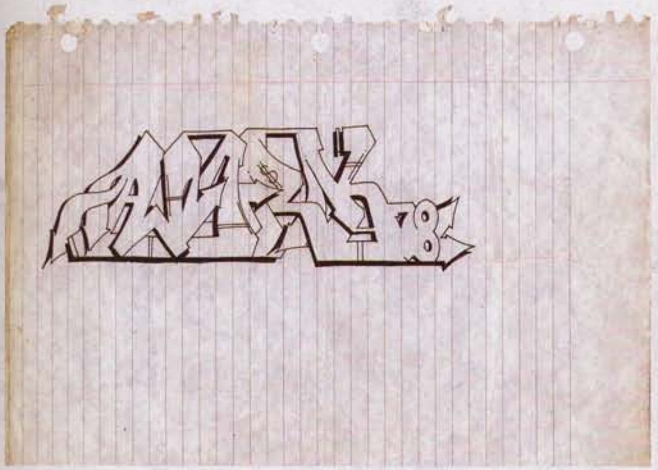
Dondi 1978



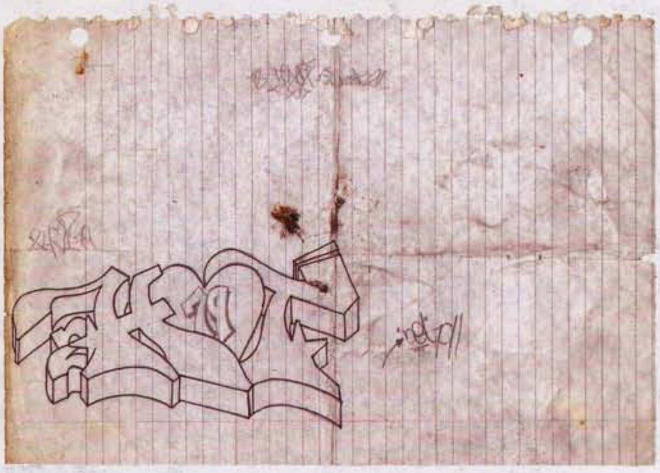
Naco 1979


"CHED"
CIA PRODUCTIONS
:DONDI:

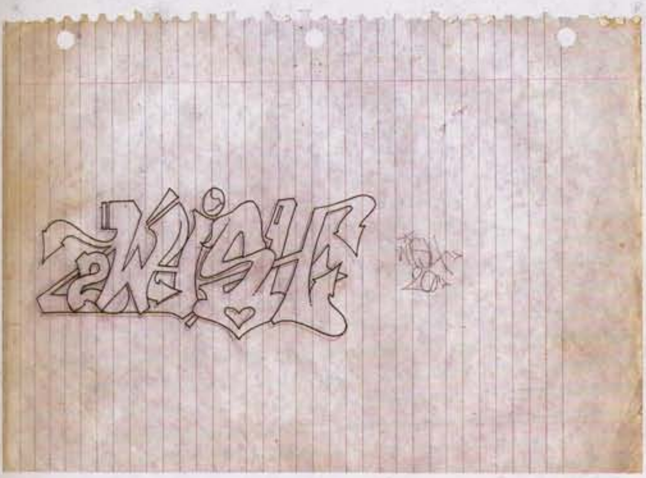
Ched 1979



Work 1978



2 Hot 1979



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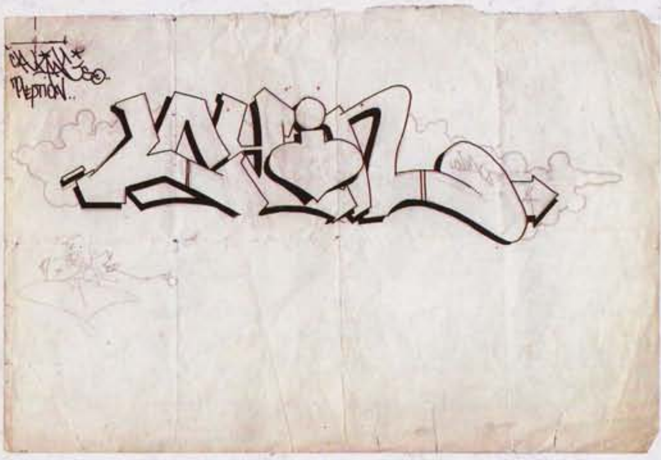
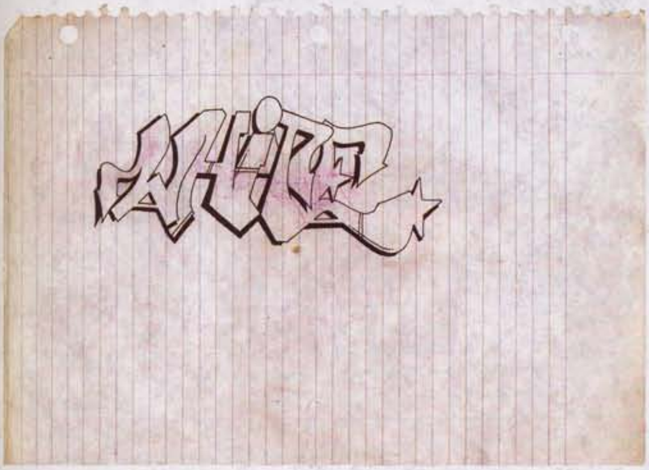
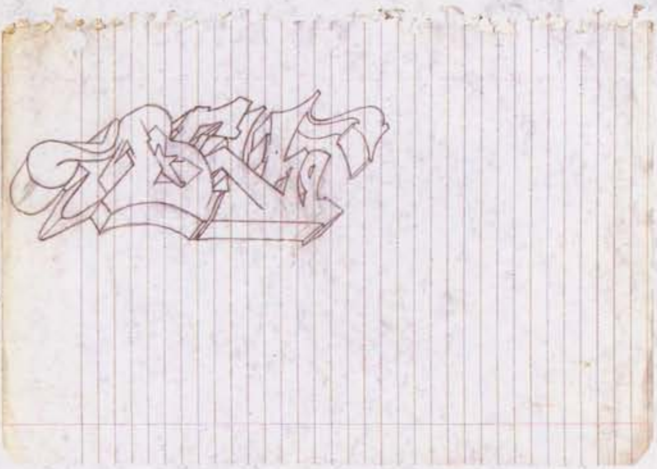


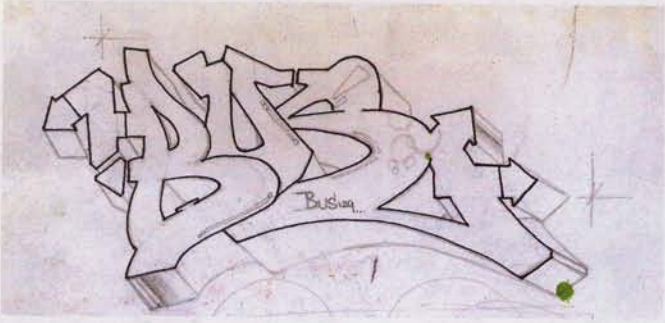
Lovin 1979



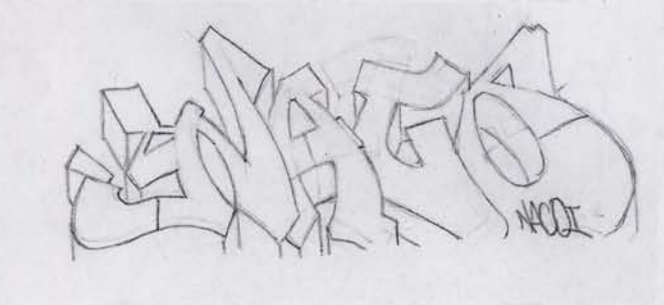
White 1978



Bev 1979



Bus 1980



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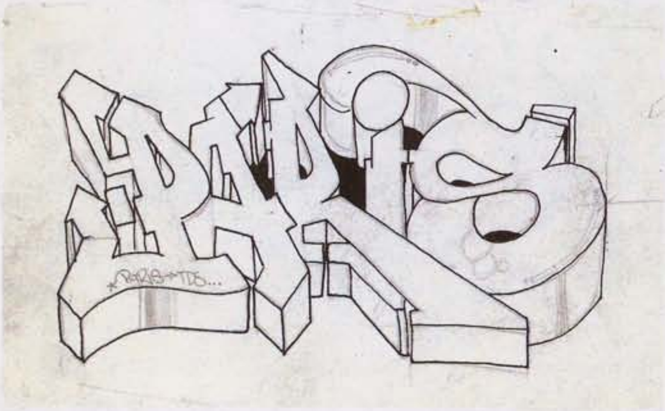
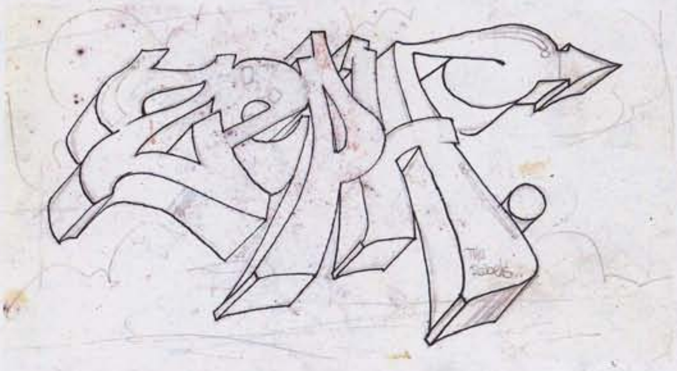


Paris 1980



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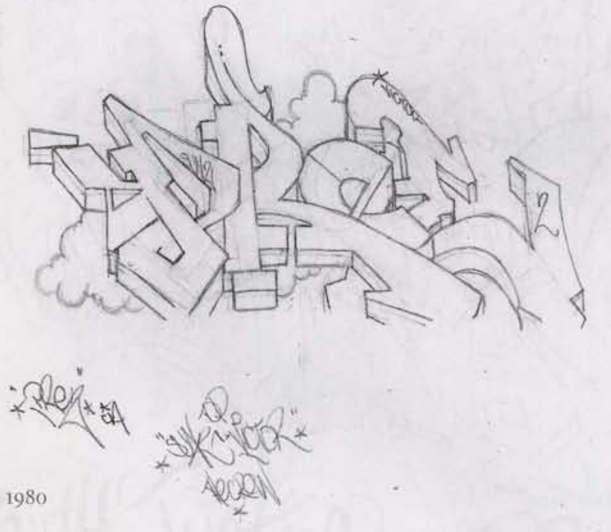

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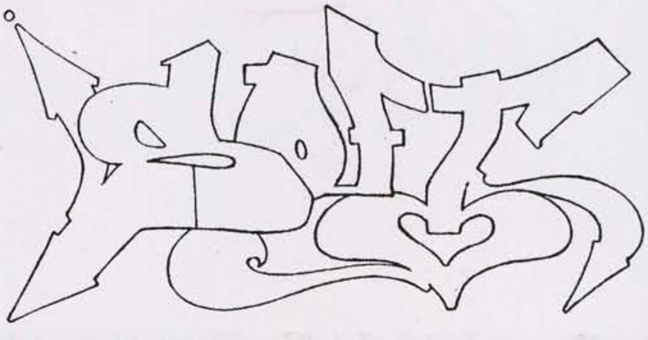

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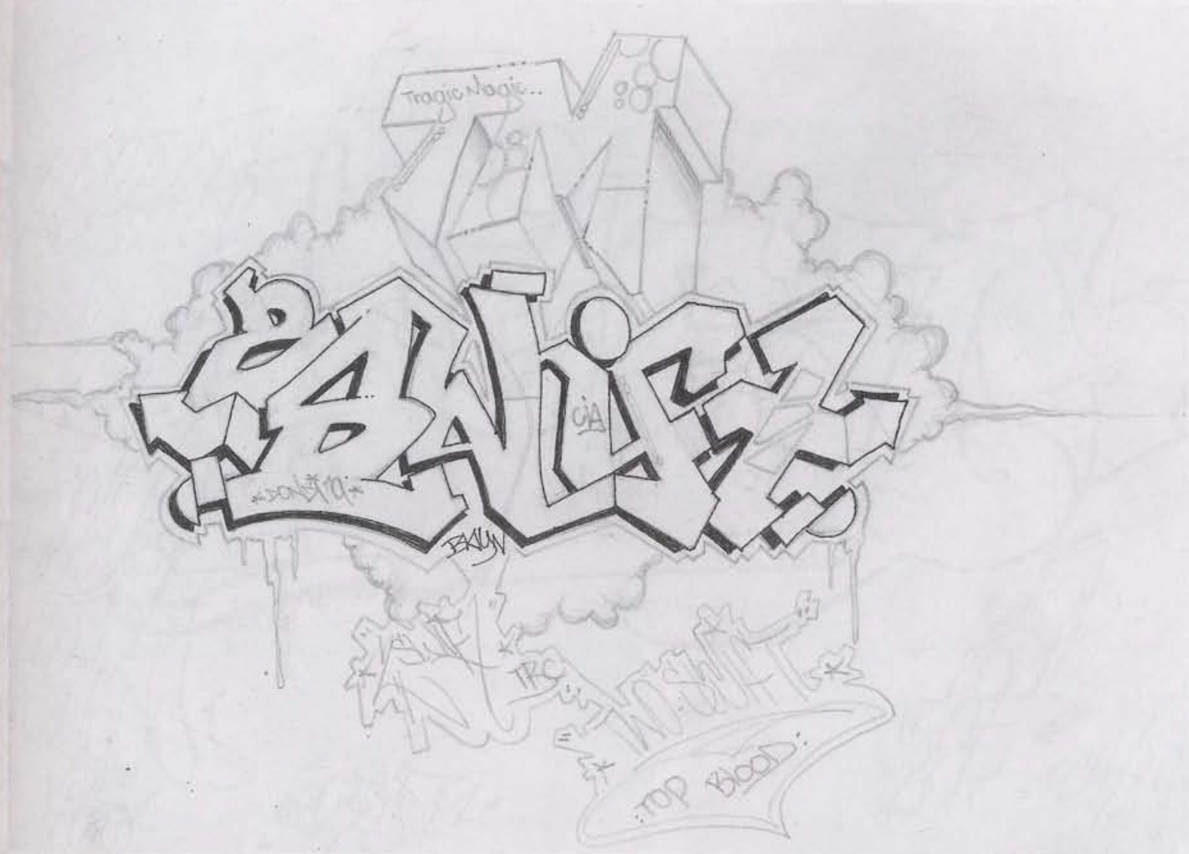
Tragic Magic..
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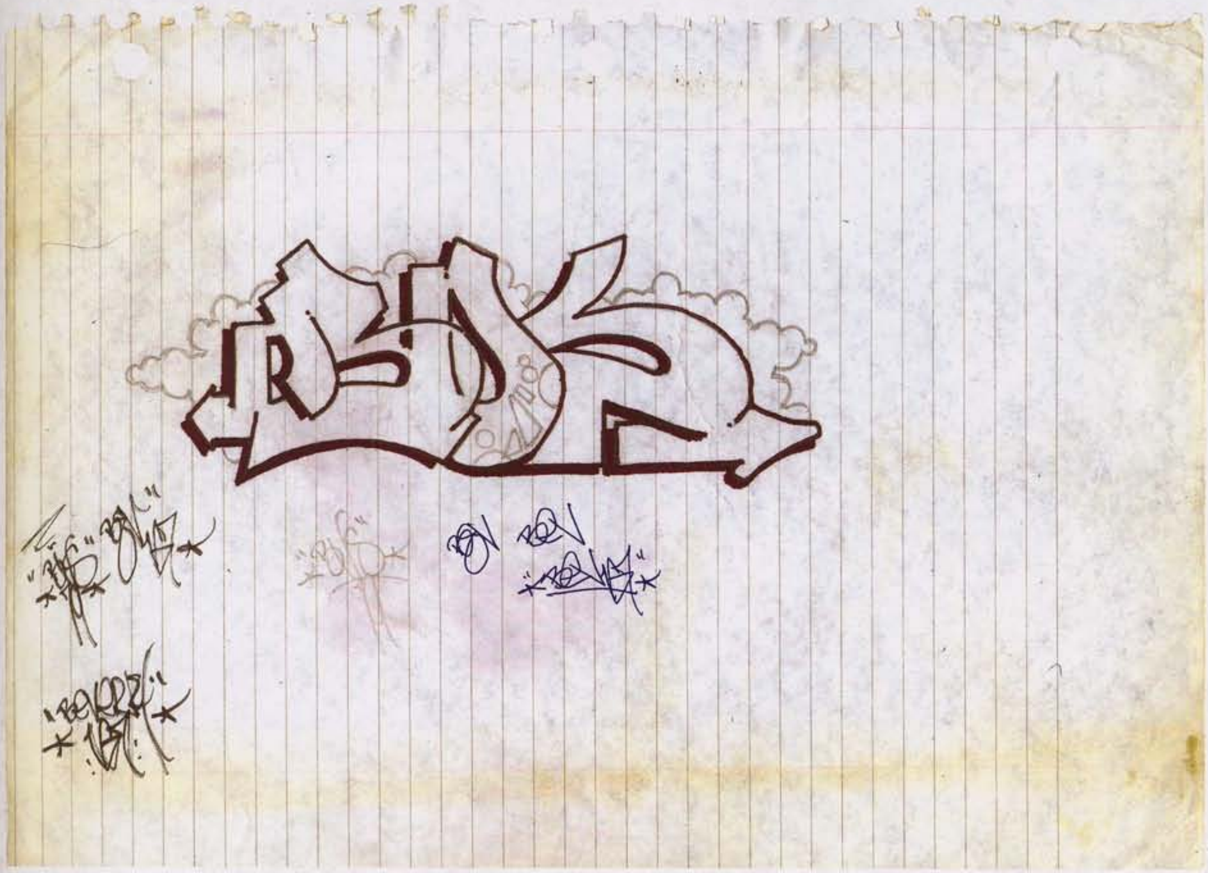
2 Swift 1980



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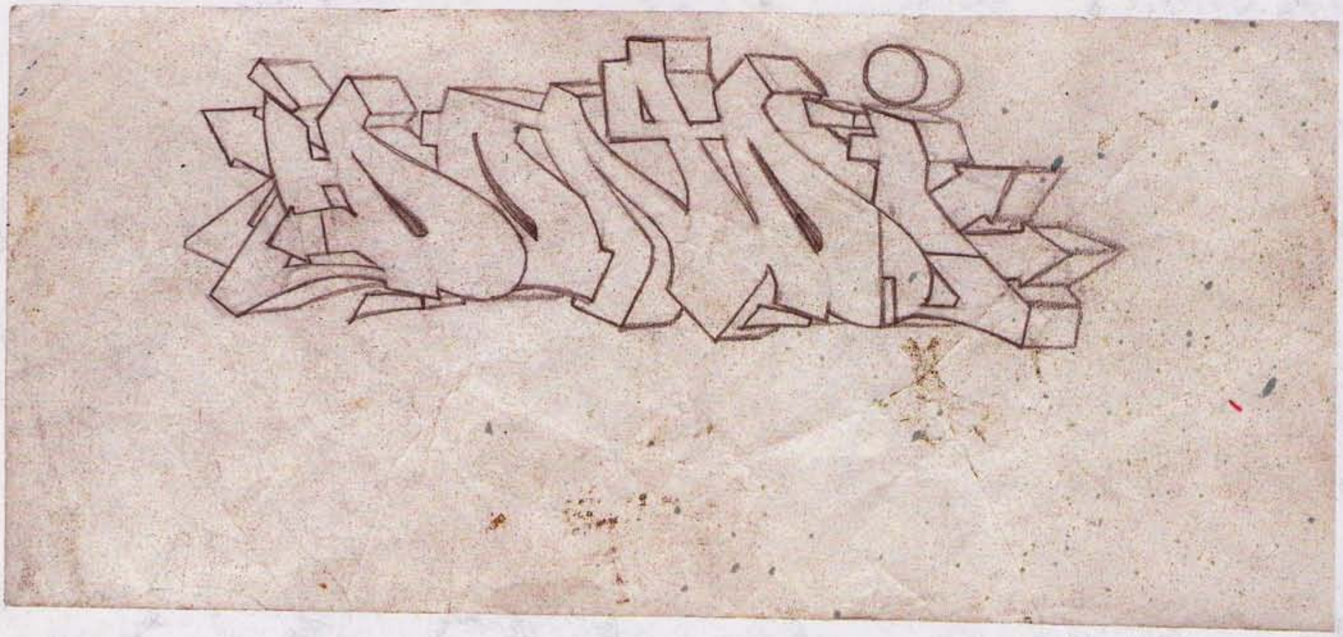
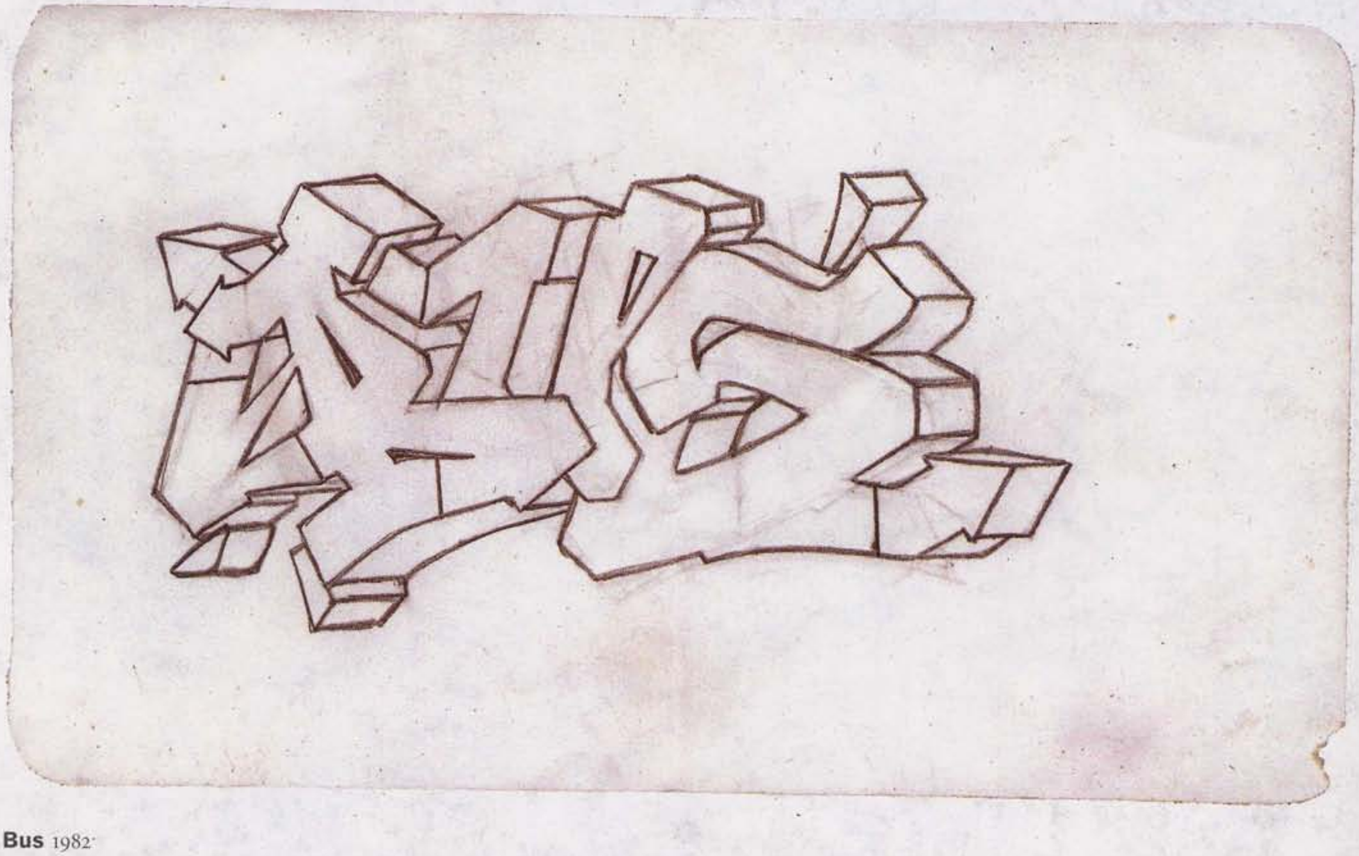
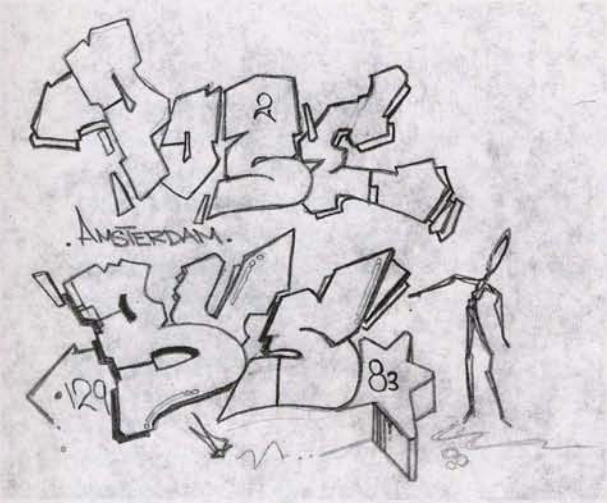


Dondi 1981



Bus 1982


AMSTERDAM.
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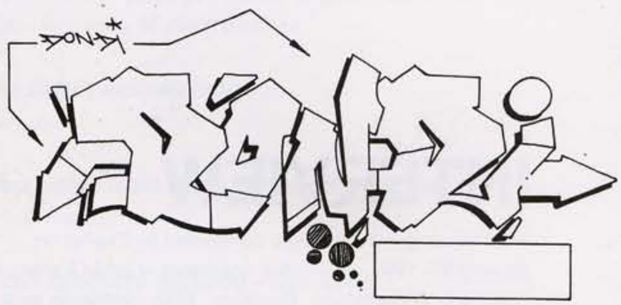
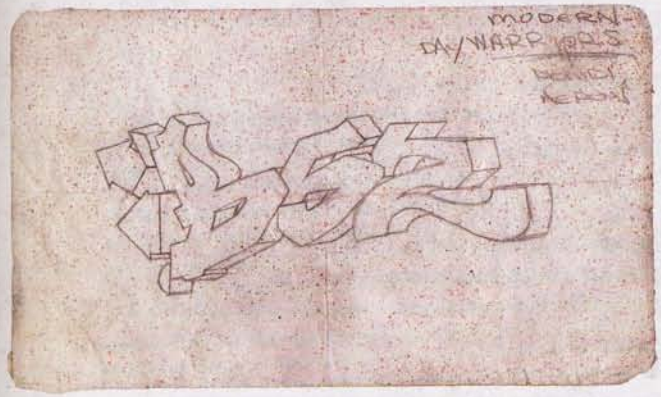
Pose Bus 1983



Dondi 1984


MODERN-DAY/WARRIORS
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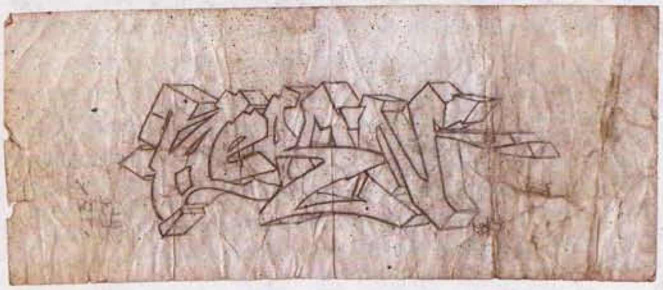
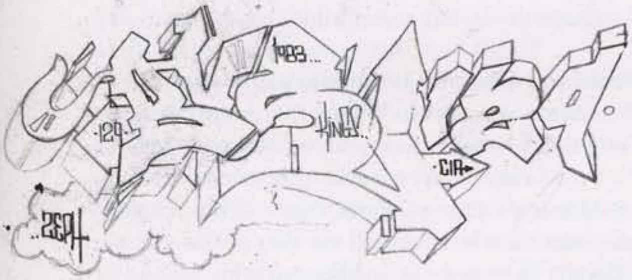
AERON

B-52 1982



Aeron 1981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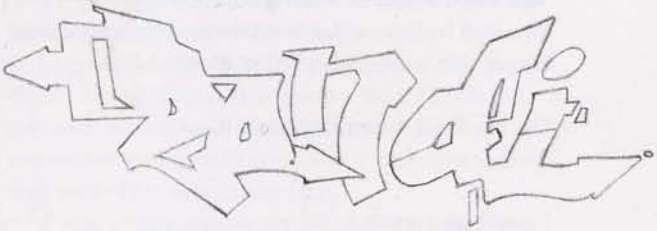
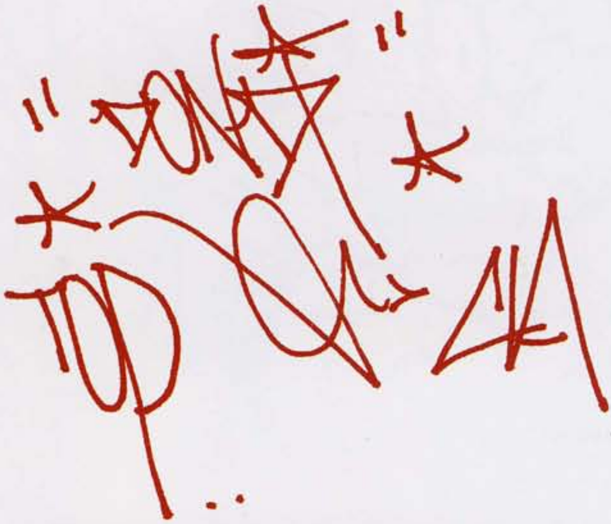
Bus 129 1983



Dondi 1983

INTERVIEW

The following interview was conducted by Zephyr on January 27, 1995, at Dondi's apartment at 384 Graham Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. With comments ranging from his early childhood to his late gallery career, it offers an unprecedented overview of Dondi's thoughts as he looked back over the sum of his experiences.



So what's your real name?
Dondi White.

On your birth certificate it says Donald, right?
I don't know. I haven't looked at my birth certificate in a long time.

You're in your mid-thirties almost.
Yeah, yeah, thirty-four years old.

And you've been in Brooklyn, living in Brooklyn, all your life, right?
Yeah, pretty much.

Were you born here?
In America?

No, in Brooklyn.
No, I wasn't born in Brooklyn—in Manhattan, at Beth Israel Hospital.

You were living in Manhattan?
We used to live on Amsterdam and Seventy-sixth Street. We were Upper West Siders.

Oh my God, I can't believe it.
Yeah.

I can't picture it.
We were Upper West Siders. I was born in Beth Israel and about six months after that, we moved to Brooklyn. East New York, Brooklyn.

That's kind of a drastic move.
Well, yeah, it was like moving to the burbs back then. I mean, the Upper West Side to East New York, I mean . . .

Do you know anything about why your family moved out to East New York?
I think because of the schools. My dad wanted to put us all in Catholic school.

Do you know why he felt so strongly about that?
It's not that he felt strongly about Catholic school, he just . . . he didn't like the way public schools were run.

Going to Catholic school, I gather that had a really major influence on your life.
Surely, yeah.

Would you label it a traumatic experience?
Oh, no, no, it was fun. What I dug most about Catholic school was that we never changed classes. We would stay in one class and the same nun would teach all the subjects. It would flip me out when my friends would tell me they would go to a different class to learn a different subject and I

would go, "Why? Why would you need to change classes? Why not have the teachers go from class to class instead of herding thirty kids around?" I liked Catholic school because it was a little more concentrated—you know, I knew there was only about eight or ten nuns, there was one janitor, two priests, one school building, one church . . .

It was simple.
Very simple.

You're probably a rarity to be someone who speaks fondly of their experience in Catholic school.
Nah, it was joyful man. All the kids who lived in the neighborhood and their big brothers went to the school before them—like me, and it was the neighborhood. You went to school with all the kids from your neighborhood so it was kinda cool.

How did being from a mixed marriage back in the early sixties affect you? Did you ever have riffs over that or anything?
Yeah, I guess I did have a beef with that, but it didn't really hit me until it was time for me to go to school. And I remember this one kid in school, he said, "Your mother's white," and I said, "What do you mean my mother's white, my mother's like . . . "

Your mother.
Right, and then it dawned on me that my mother was a different color than my father, but it took an outsider to bring that to light for me.

That was when you went to junior high?
This was early on in Catholic school. This was like the second or third grade that some smart aleck pointed that out to me. And then I thought about it for a while and then I became really defensive. When I would go out shopping with my mom I was always conscious of how people looked at her with us. And then I thought, "Well, that's kind of weird." But then it didn't really bother me because it wasn't something that was discussed in the home. My father never said, "Kids are going to give you a hard time because of your mother."

He didn't acknowledge it.
No, no.

You come from a big family, all boys, right?
Four brothers.

Four brothers and you—five sons.
Uh-huh.

And you're the youngest?
Yup, the youngest of five.

So you got dumped on or you got over?
Being the youngest was kind of cool. I had four older knuckleheads to learn from. My dad would say, "Just watch your brothers, watch them and learn from them, 'cause they're going to make a few mistakes that you can learn from." So I watched my older brother go through a pot thing, and my dad getting on his case 'cause he didn't want longhaired kids in the home. Then I watched my other brother run away, I mean I watched my older brother become a stone thief where you couldn't leave anything around because he would steal it. So I did learn from these guys.

You learned what not to do . . .
Yeah, I learned what not to do.

So still, to this day, up to the minute, are you still the good son?
I don't think I was ever the good son. The good son was my brother next to me, Michael; he was the good son. He would always listen to my dad and he was closest to my dad. And my mom, she had her favorite son who was the second oldest, Robert. And I was just the youngest. I was just there. My brothers were always told, "Look out for your little brother," and they would. I remember going to Coney Island with them. It was cool. This is a funny story:

I was saving money for my first bicycle. My dad took me to this bicycle shop that used to be on New Lots Avenue. It was called Pete's Bicycle Shop. I remember I used to hang out by the Iverson factory. I know I'm getting really off track here, but there used to be this Iverson bicycle factory out in East New York, Brooklyn; it was actually by the Two Yard, but of course I didn't know anything about the Two Yard then.

So, it was over by the Two Yard and we used to go rummaging around in the bins, and I used to talk to the guys who were on lunch break and they would say, "Yeah, Iverson, it's a good bike. Go to Pete's 'cause that's where they sell them. You can't buy a bicycle from here and you know we can't give you one." So I remember I bugged my dad that I wanted an Iverson bicycle so he took me to Pete's. I wanted a white bicycle with a pearlescent banana saddle seat and pearlescent anatomical little grips and knobs and things.

It was about fifty-nine bucks, sixty-nine bucks or something like that. He said, "If you save your allowance money all summer you can come and buy this bicycle." So I was puttin' away my allowance money. And I think I was in second grade going into third grade, and that was the first summer that he allowed my brothers to take me along with them. And I remember the first road trip that my brothers, all four of my brothers, took to Coney Island to the arcades. And I remember I had my little loot and shit going to the penny arcades. And I remember being with my brothers thinking, "Wow, this is cool, and I don't want a bicycle now." Because I knew a bicycle would separate me from my brothers. As long as I wasn't totally independent I could get to hang out with them.

Let's talk about East New York in the sixties. You moved out there and I imagine you must've watched that neighborhood really decay? Or not?

Yeah, yeah, surely.

Is it something you can pinpoint?

It was when the businesses started to close and move out of East New York, like the Iverson bicycle factory and Sunnydale Farms.

Do you remember what year?

It had to be '73 or '74, 'cause I was starting high school. I started high school in '75. That is when the gangs came into play in East New York. And that changed everything—you couldn't go out to Miller Park anymore because of the Tomahawks, which was a black gang. And then there was the Crazy Homicides, a Puerto Rican gang which was over on Pitkin Avenue near 302. They had that area. And then across Atlantic Avenue there were the crazy Irish kids called the Headers. You couldn't go across Atlantic Avenue to go into Highland Park and you wouldn't really want to hang in Miller Park because of the Tomahawks and they were always drunk and . . .

And I guess on the weekends they would all go to Coney Island.

Well, yeah, you would have to escape and get outta the neighborhoods.

Legend has it that Coney Island was a place where all the gangs could cohabitate in one area without, you know, really killing each other.

Maybe so, but I would think there was a big gang contingency in that neighborhood anyway. I don't know that other gangs from other neighborhoods would go there unless they wanted to talk peace or something.

As I came up in East New York, I joined the gangs also; I joined the Crazy Homicides. But we didn't go to Coney Island. I remember we used to go out to Queens to meet with all these other guys called . . . I don't remember what they were called . . . just another Hispanic gang.

Do you mind talking about that?

Sure, sure, I mean, the gang situation was fucked up. The only reason I joined a gang was so I wouldn't get beat up.

What kind of shit were they into?

They were low-level gangsters. They would extort the local bodegas and I remember we used to hang out on Pitkin Avenue . . . We would just intimidate. We would just want beer and go in and the guy would give us beer and then it was cool because we would hang outside the store and make sure no one would go in and rob it.

It was fairly innocent in a sense?
Yeah, it was. They only wanted their beer. I hung out with the Hispanics—the majority of the gangs were Hispanic in East New York except for the Tomahawks.

What year are we talkin' about now? '74?
No, we're talking like '76 maybe? First year in high school, '75, '76.

You were starting to write graffiti already?
I'd already been tagging up. I was tagging up when my brother moved to Essex Houses, right by the Two Yard. That's how I found the Two Yard. I met this one guy, UPS 2, over there. The walk from my mom's house to my brother's house, that's when I'd tag up. That was my little route.

How did you discover graffiti? You met some guys who were into it or you just got into it on your own?
No, I think I got into it on my own, because as I would go to different neighborhoods I would always look on the walls to see what gang was in the neighborhood. I was always reading shit on the walls.

Right.
That might have been a start, but I also remember riding the A train and seeing graffiti. It's kinda hard to pinpoint, but I guess I truly became conscious of writing on the wall when I would walk from neighborhood to neighborhood and find out what gang was in each one, the Tomahawks or whatever.

When did your parents find out you were doing graffiti?
Wow, not until '83.

What? Not till 1983! But in '79 you had done the roof of your house!
That's true, but my parents never went to the roof, they never went up there.

But all the writers that would come by your house, they didn't know they were writers? Didn't they see spray paint and markers? They knew you were defacing your room but they didn't know you were defacing the streets?
Well, they knew I was doing something, but they didn't know I was actually going into the subway. They knew I had some fascination with painting, but see, for them as parents, it was kind of a clear transition for me to go from sitting around drawing to painting on small canvases. They saw it happening.

But what about all the night missions? You snuck out all the time and snuck back in?
Just hanging out late—yeah.

Very late sometimes, right?
Not really, I used to come home . . . well yeah, I guess for a teenager, two, two-thirty in the morning was kind of late. I just told them I was out late with the fellas. I mean, they didn't know that I wrote on trains until my dad saw me on channel seven doing an interview for the Fun Gallery. That's when my dad found out I was a writer, and by that point I'd basically stopped.

That's incredible, I can't believe it; so suffice to say, you must have never have had any trouble with the law.
Nah, no.

Amazing. Did you ever think that you were going to be the influential character that you became?
Initially I didn't think I'd have an impact, because graffiti was only one of the things that I did coming up in East New York—I raised pigeons, I hung out with the local guys who played pool.

You weren't that serious about the writing.
No, raising pigeons was probably a bigger pastime for me in the beginning than writing on

walls. I remember my pigeon coop had tags on it from other guys that wrote. It didn't really hit me until I started CIA, and that was like '78 or something. It was probably after I started meeting guys like NOC who were just nuts about it. I couldn't believe, until I met other writers, how obsessed people were. When I met UPS 2, that guy was like a Pilot maniac. He would pin them and put screws in them and he had ink. And me, I would pin El Markos, and if I had a spray can I'd use it. I wasn't really racking up paint or anything, but then when I met other writers I saw that these guys were pretty serious about it. That's when I started really putting a lot of time into it. Really developing a style and finding out where these guys go. And then I realized that the thing to do was to come up with a crew. I guess that was a gang mentality, you know, travel in numbers, and if you have something, get other guys to write that something.

Well, I'm sure you were influenced by, to a certain degree, the Fabulous Five.
No. No, no, no.

No?
TOP.

TOP?
When I met JEE 2, JEE 2 introduced me—wait, who did I meet first? Oh, I met HURST who was OI, then I met his prez, who was MICKEY (TOP), and MICKEY said he had a good friend who was JEE 2 (James), and James knew this guy who was called NOC, and NOC was supposedly the best graffiti artist on earth. I said get the fuck out—I'd never heard of him.

Who did you think was real good? Brooklyn guys . . .
I thought . . .

SLAVE?
Well . . .

Were you friends with SLAVE?
I was friends with SLAVE, but there was this guy UNCLE JOHN from the BMTs. I thought those guys were the cat's meow. UNCLE JOHN was a friend of MICKEY's. Those guys were always UNCLE JOHN and TEAR, UNCLE JOHN and TEAR, whole cars with clouds and I thought that was cool. Then there was this other kid, Don, from the BMT line who was kinda fuckin' dope. See, I didn't know that Don had a Bronx connection, 'cause I would see him on the BMTs. I thought he was from Brooklyn; I didn't know he was up there.

So you looked at IRTs, too.
Just the Twos. My days back in East New York consisted in the summertime of waking up—this was after we moved off Van Siclen to Bradford Street—and walking to Maxwell schoolyard. I would meet up with CD, Crazy DIKE, his brother SID, their cousin IK. DURO was around then, he was writing SONO, but he just wasn't really into it. We would walk to Williamsburg, through Brownsville, pick up HURST, and then go up and get MICKEY. All during the way we would rack up Bustelo coffee. We would rack up the Bustelo coffee and as we walked through the neighborhoods we would sell it—two packs for three dollars. That's where we used to get our money for our beer and our weed. By the time we got to MICKEY's neighborhood we had some money, we had our weed, we had our beer. We would then hop on the J train, go out to Queens, rack up paint from a few hardware stores there, then ditch the paint. Bench 'em at East New York and Broadway Junction on the J line under the staircase by the sandbox. Just bench 'em, see what's out, and then just wait for nighttime. Get our paint and go to the J yard.

You weren't known as a whole-car guy, and then you came out with these amazing whole-cars.
The whole-car thing came from me just wanting to do more. I don't think it was wanting to be elaborate and good, I think it was the bomber mentality in me that made me do whole-cars.

Because before I did color whole-cars, I did silver whole-cars on the J line. And they basically were scaled-up blockbusters that I was doing as window-downs. When I first saw LEE whole-cars I thought they were really great, until I caught one in the Two Yard. They were great, but I thought they were a lot better until I actually saw one up close.

They're painted real fast.
Yeah, there were drips and everything and I'm thinking, "Well this is, this is okay, it's good, but . . ."

But when you saw them up close they weren't as impressive as when you saw them . . .
Right, right.

Which is the way he paints.
Of course, this led me to believe that he was doing these things out of a bomber mentality, a big bomber mentality. And he wasn't trying to become the muralist of the graffiti scene, which eventually happened because he covered so much space. When I was doing whole-cars, I was just doing whole-cars because they were fun. It was the next step for me.

Exactly.
Coming from the bomber mentality, you know, doing blockbusters, developing style, starting to bend letters, throw arrows, do wild styles, and soon that was the only other thing to do.

Did you have real specific ideas about where you were trying to take it? What were you trying to do with CIA? Were you content to basically do their pieces for them or were you even thinking about it?
Well, I was thinking about it to some degree. I never really wanted to do their pieces, but if they were on the car with me I wouldn't allow them to destroy the car. So if they failed to execute properly I would intervene, I would come in and kind of get their piece working so they could carry it from there. And if they couldn't, I would do the outline even. Some guys I had to do outlines for from beginning to end, some guys I only did two outlines for, some guys I only did outlines on paper. Some guys caught on really quickly, but I wasn't really conscious of directing a group of guys and making them good or having whatever I developed rub off on them or even teach them what I'd learned. It just happened.

They would hang around and pick up stuff.
Yeah. It was this: I mean, the whole idea behind writing was to get in with a group of people, or just be around guys who shared a common interest.

Let's get to the impossible question: Where did all your talent come from? Your background was no different then some of these other guys from CIA, and yet . . .
I think I just had a slightly higher perception. When I looked at something, I would see a line out of place. Whereas other guys they couldn't see it, they couldn't see that their "E" got skinny in that section, they didn't think of it in that manner. My whole idea, my thing for style, was keeping the letters consistent, keeping them flowing. Whereas, other guys weren't really conscious of that. I mean they didn't know what made a piece work. They didn't analyze piecing and I kinda did, you know? When I looked at certain pieces, I would look for the flaw. It didn't matter how it was outlined, or what the colors were, if the letter failed someplace then it failed, and then it was a flawed piece.

I'll tell you something: I've only done an outline given to me once and even then, I reworked it. It was by SLAVE and I consider NOC to be ten times better than SLAVE in the style department, but I would never do a NOC outline because there was the Brooklyn/Bronx thing. I wouldn't allow a guy from the Bronx to give me an outline just because he was from the Bronx.

Right.
NOC was an equal, but SLAVE was on a pedestal to me, just because he was from Brooklyn and he was one of the leading guys from Brooklyn. None of those other guys—DINO, NOD—meant nothing to me. But I remember I respected SLAVE the most. And he

did do this BUS outline for the BUS BOY piece that NOC and I did in Utica. And I remember I looked at it, and I couldn't insult this guy by going, "No, I'll do mine." So I kind of reworked it quickly right there in front of him and I go, "What do you think?" And he went, "Yeah, yeah, that's good." And I did it because I respected him so much. I would never do anyone else's outline. I mean, if I was going to do someone else's outline, I would do a NOC outline—you know, NOC did BUS pieces also.

What about your, I believe the word would be "fastidiousness"? Your perfectionism, your cleanliness, crisp, the whole crispness?
Right, that's part of my upbringing. I was raised to be very neat.

Did you ever say, "If I keep being fastidious it's going to pay off 'cause people are going to come to respect this or understand it"? Or did you ever get tempted to just start throwing paint and just going against the grain?
No, that's not me; that's not what I have inside. I do things because I have them inside and I need to release them. And when I release them, they come from the heart and the soul. That's a strength. That's my strength. So if I want to do something and influence people, I have to influence people with my strengths, not my weaknesses. But I did strive to learn how to draw, to just be knowledgeable of good drawing techniques. And I didn't really know how to draw, you know, and a lot of people helped me. People allowed me to be around them and watch them, and I picked it up on my own. I didn't know anything about Rapidographs or paper or different materials, or even how to stretch canvas. But a lot of my friends who I met through writing on subways allowed me to be around to pick these things up.

And how would you react to someone saying that you are the most influential person in graffiti writing? How would you respond?
Well, maybe. I only say that because there's a certain level of consistency there.

What do you mean by that?
The letter style, my letter style has never really changed. Once I developed it and it became second nature to me, it didn't really change, its structure remained the same. I came out with new stuff, but I mean, there was trends, one I call the "big-head" trend. The letters were skinny on the bottom with big heads. That style was okay, but I didn't particularly move into that style—it didn't suit me. I stayed with my own style. And even now when like these guys like Adrian Nabi call me up from Berlin and they ask me to do a "soft" piece, you know, the word *soft* and it has to have a "soft" feeling. And I mean, you're not bringing me out of my element because I believe I didn't really like hard line; you know, my letter style was always soft to begin with. I didn't really like CASE's style. It's good, but it wasn't me. It's not right, it's not what I do. I don't like computerism. I like letter style, very soft letter style—that's what I've developed over the years on trains, and that's what I've kept throughout.

So basically you just did your thing and if people have imitated you more than anyone else, then you don't know why. You don't even know if it's true and if it is, you don't know why.
I don't know if it's true, and I don't know why they're influenced by it or why they like it or prefer it more than other styles. I don't know what motivates these kids or these new writers and because I've kind of removed myself from it, I concentrated on my work as an individual, and I didn't follow the trends that came about after I stopped writing.

Did you ever anticipate the level to which your style would affect other writers?
No, never, never, never, but I'm a firm believer that you must make room for the new. You just can't stay there and hoard space. If I stayed around and I tried to be the master of style, or the style master general, or the prince of graffiti or whatever all these titles were back then, if I'm still trying to be that person, I'm taking up room meant for new artists who can come in and develop style.

Yeah, but then that's kind of my point, they're not developing that much shit, they're basically listening to your record over and over.
Right, but you have to give them room.

They're sampling your record, man.
But if I was there . . .

I'm certainly not suggesting that you still would be active now . . .
It would probably do more damage than good if I went out and did walls right now. For one, the writers that really respect me might feel like I've lost it or something because I'm not totally painting in the same exact style as I painted back then. And maybe they won't see that I have been working on a lot of other styles in the last ten years, so they won't see the progress, they won't see the evolution of it. They'll be disappointed. It's sometimes good to just leave it as what it was then, and let them expand on that. Another reason why I won't write these days is because my ego is too fragile to be crossed out now. I don't want to be crossed out.

If you felt like doing a wall mural and wanted to do it badly enough I'm sure you would do it.
Nah, I'd like to do a subway car. I don't like this wall stuff.

Well, subways don't run.
But it's still a nice thing to do. When I left graffiti I was doing the gallery thing. During the eighties it was just hard. I mean it was just a pace that was pretty high.

Did you burn out?
Surely.

Did you do too much, too fast?
Did way too much, way too fast. Between '82 and '85 I created enough work to supply ten dealers in five galleries. I didn't want to do my art at that level anymore. I saw my work really changing and I didn't really like it. And I just wanted, I consciously wanted, to change. I just didn't want to do art at that pace anymore.

You saw your art changing and you didn't like it? You didn't like the work?
I didn't like the work.

Did you ever feel that your audience had abandoned you?
The thing is, I felt if I wasn't painting then people would think I wasn't a real artist to begin with, because now that times are slow, I'm not painting anymore. So, I was only painting for the money or painting for the sake of selling paintings. So when things became slow I still wanted to paint just to show people that I'm a painter and I'll paint even if I'm not making money. But then I was forcing it because I didn't really want to paint, you know? I just didn't want to paint. I came into this market on demand. I did paintings because they wanted paintings. I wasn't doing paintings because I wanted to do paintings. I was just meeting people who were asking me for works that they could keep instead of works that they could see on subways or photographed by someone else. So I was painting because there was a demand, and when the demand fell, everything I saw and learned led me to believe that if I have this talent I should continue even if I'm not making money. I didn't realize then that I would do it no matter what.

Do you consider yourself a painter?
Yeah, yeah. I'm not painting very much these days, but I do consider myself a painter. Because all the drawings I do, what I'm mainly working on now, are kind of working ideas for paintings.

What kind of emotion surrounds your painting now? Is it problematic or is it easy?
Nah, it's totally easy because now my new structure is that the drawings are working sketches, but they stand on their own as complete ideas and complete thoughts and complete pieces, but it's a challenge for me to get the drawings up to scale with paint. I remember guys who would write on trains, who would do these massive outlines on paper. Then they would go to the yard, and the piece would be nothing like what they had on paper. They just couldn't do it. And I've always

always said that because I learned how to paint before I learned how to draw, anything I could do on paper, I could do with paint. So if I had this massive outline, this wild style on paper, there was no problem for me to go to a subway car and do it. There wasn't really a challenge there, so painting became fun for me when I went to the yard. It wasn't like "Oh shit, I can't get that outline." It's the same thing with my drawings now. The challenge lies with the drawings. To get what I feel in my heart onto the paper and get it as a complete idea and a complete thought. And then it becomes fun to make that drawing a painting.

Do you foresee any time when you might try to translate them onto canvas?

No. No time soon. I'm perfectly happy working at this pace, which is very, very slow. Just sitting at home doing drawings. I have no real desire to paint now, but as long as I'm logging ideas and getting it out, it's okay.

Do you set goals for yourself in your art?

No, no, not with my art. I set goals for myself in my personal life, because once I have complete order in my personal life then I can execute my art the way I want to.

Are you content to not seek an audience or buyers for your current drawings?

At the moment, yeah, I'm content with just doing them.

Just for the sake of doing them?

Just to get the ideas out, just to get it out, get it on paper. They're reference points, but they're strong reference points.

Do you think you've wasted some time?

I've wasted big time.

Why, because you got too used to something and you . . .

I wasted too much time drinking. I've wasted too much time concerning myself with my friends, I've wasted too much time being alone. I've wasted some time.

You've wasted time in some relationships?

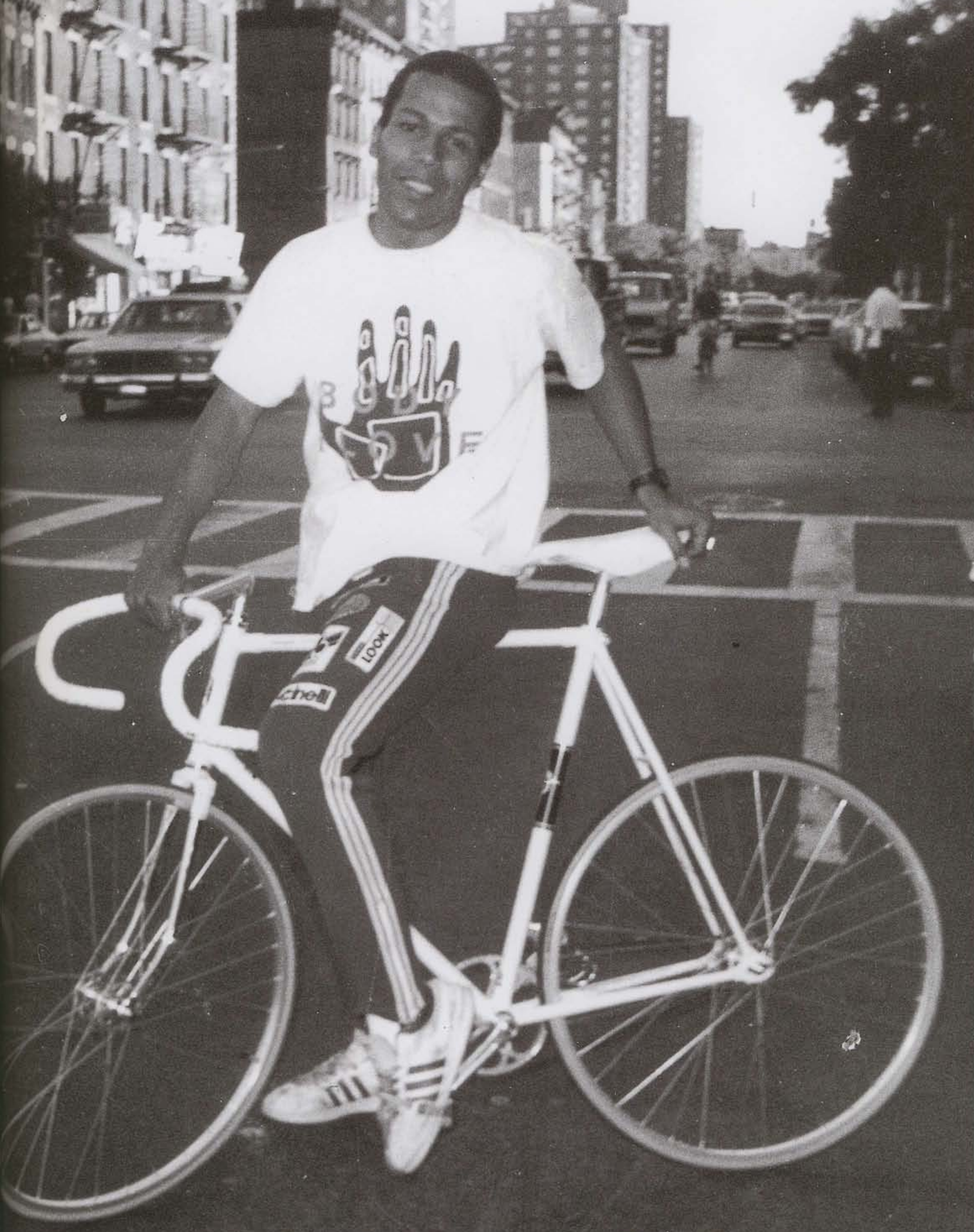
Nah, anytime you interact with another human I don't think it's a total waste of time because to me, they're studies. You meet these people and even when the relationship goes bad you get something good out of it because you study these people so you don't make the same mistake again, so it's not a waste of time.

Do you believe in having regrets in your life?

I don't. I don't regret anything.

Sounds like you do.

At one point I did. They're all learning experiences. I don't regret anything. If I had to do it all over again, I would do it all the same way. I wouldn't change anything.


LOOK

aboveground

When Dondi showed up at Esses Studio in March 1980 to paint his first large canvas, he was already a well-respected king in the graffiti game, and ready for new challenges. Dondi was completely at ease in the studio setting and able to translate his aerosol work to canvas.

Energized by the Esses Studio experience (p. 146) Dondi began creating paintings in the basement of his family's home on Bradford Street. During '80 and '81, as New York's graffiti movement exploded aboveground, Dondi was offered a number of chances to exhibit his new works. Although he participated in a large number of group shows, he preferred the individual focus that solo shows provided. Before his first one-man exhibit at the Fun Gallery in February 1982, Dondi's work had only been exhibited three or four times. But Astor and Stelling, the Fun's proprietors, loved Dondi's work and were confident in his abilities.

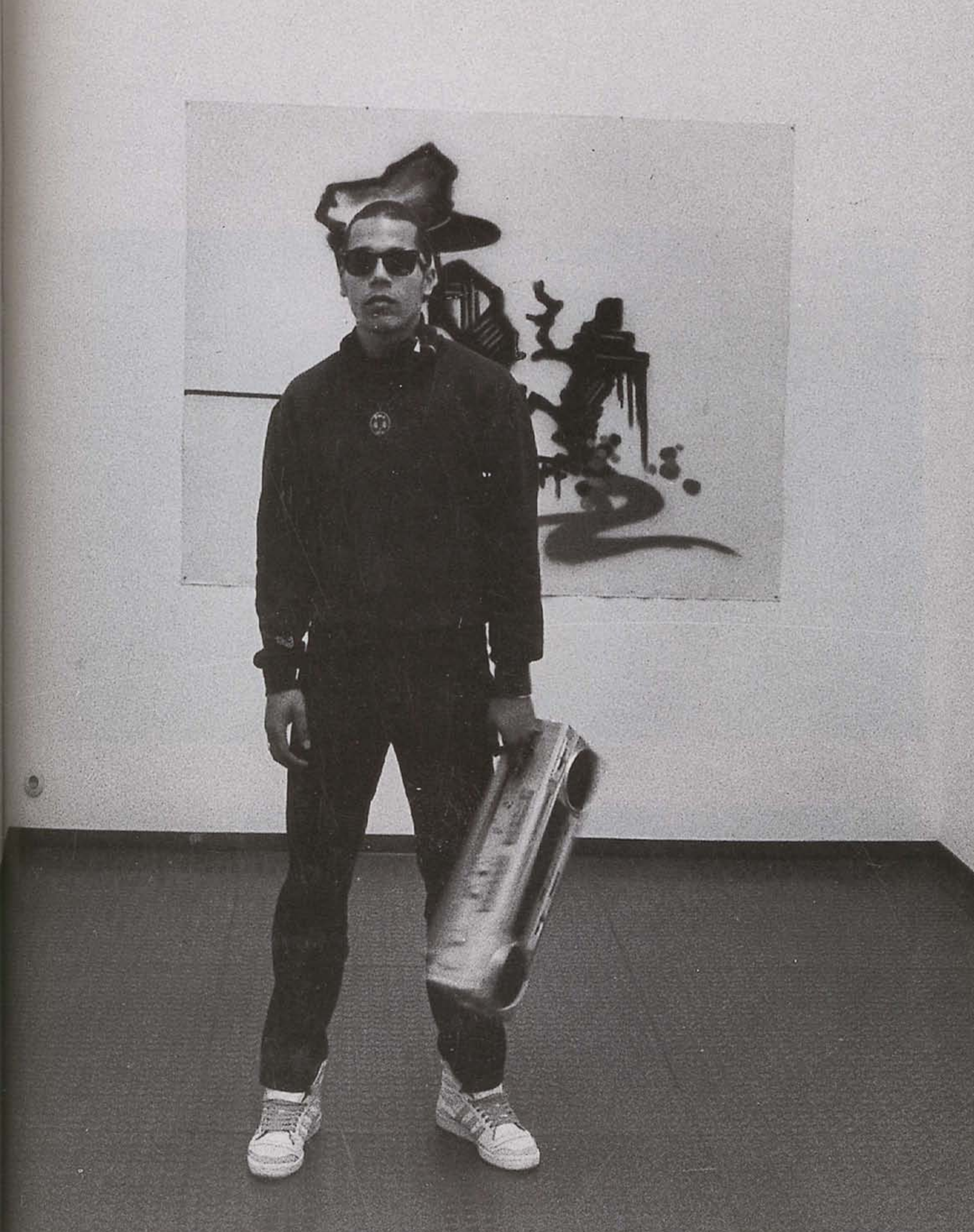
The excitement, energy, and positive write-ups that the exhibitions of graffiti-based work generated brought the European collectors and dealers running. A Dutch gallery owner named Yaki Kornblit arrived in New York with the hopes of re-creating the success back home in Holland. He assured a number of the top graffiti artists that he could do a lot for them, and showed his faith by signing ten of them to upcoming shows at his gallery in Amsterdam. It is no coincidence that Kornblit re-opened his gallery in January 1983 with the paintings of Dondi White. Not only did Kornblit sell everything Dondi painted, he promoted Dondi's work in subsequent shows in Antwerp, Zurich, and an important solo exhibit in Düsseldorf—all within the course of a year. But the pinnacle of the foreign activity was the museum shows.

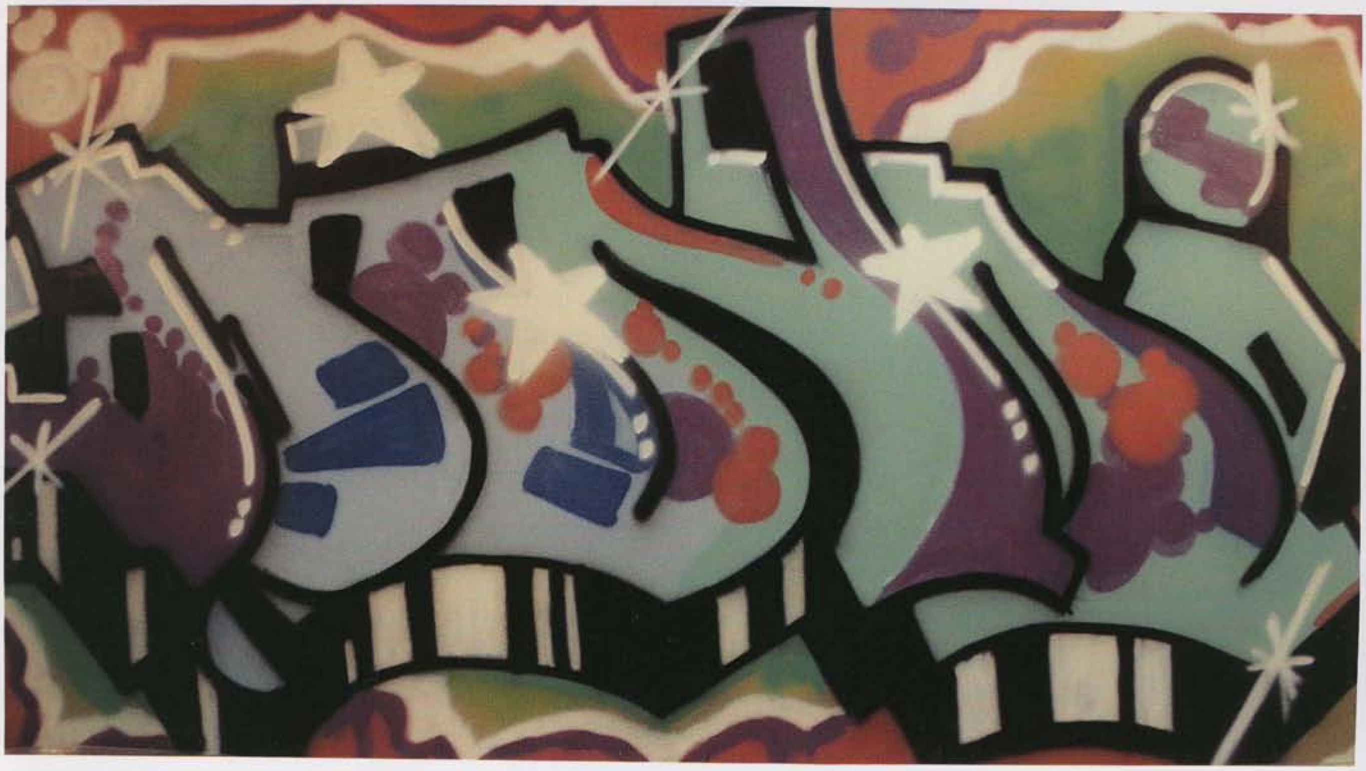
Dondi's paintings appeared at the Boymans-Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam in October 1983. In a show simply titled "Graffiti," his paintings were exhibited alongside those of BLADE, SEEN, Futura, CRASH, QUIK, NOC, and LEE. The same show appeared in January 1984 at the Groninger Museum, and a modified version of the exhibit traveled to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Lousiana Museum in Humlebeak later that year.

Dondi returned home a star. By age twenty-two he had mounted seven well-received one-man shows, and had his canvases displayed in a number of European museums. Not bad for a graffiti artist from East New York with no formal art training and a painting studio in his mother's basement. But after four years of travel and nonstop painting, Dondi felt creatively burned out. After his second show at Kornblit's gallery in May 1984, Dondi put on the brakes. His work continued to be shown and collected in Europe, and after Kornblit left the business, other dealers like Henk Pijnenburg filled the gap. Dondi's self-imposed "semi-retirement" was good for his psyche and also good for his work, as his later drawings attest. These drawings are among the finest examples of Dondi's "aboveground" work.

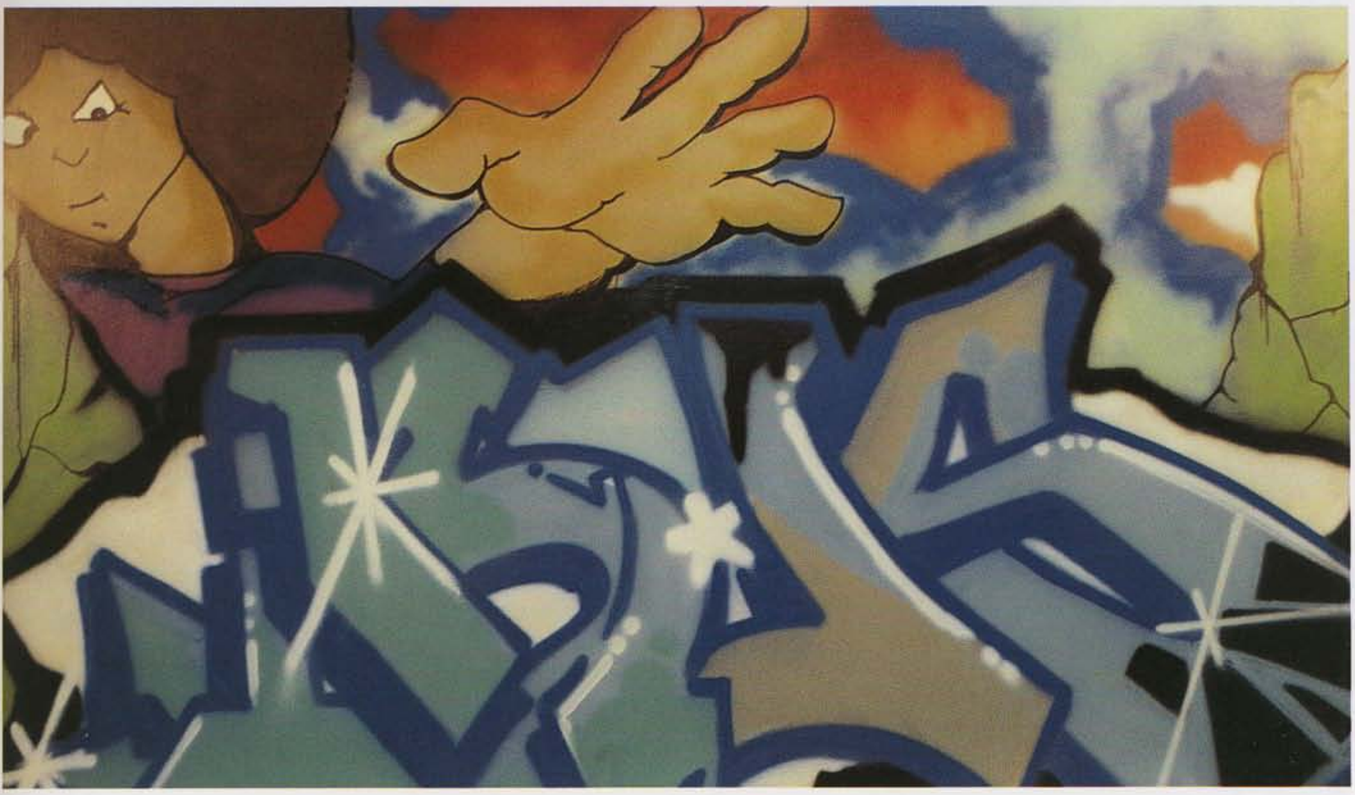
In the final years of his life, Dondi worked mainly with collage. His favorite technique involved carefully cutting and pasting blueprints into his work to emphasize shapes and figures. This fastidious procedure was the culmination of his art, and these works say a lot about a man whose passion for control, precision, and planning, truly defined him.

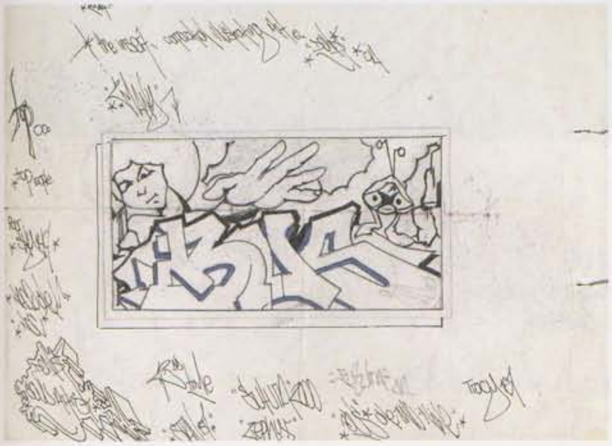
"WRITING ON THE SUBWAYS WAS A GOOD WAY TO COMMUNICATE THE IDEAS THAT I HAD. MOVING INTO THE GALLERY, I HAD A WHOLE OTHER AUDIENCE I HAD TO COMMUNICATE WITH WHICH WAS GOOD, BECAUSE IT MADE MY WORK EVOLVE."
—DONDI



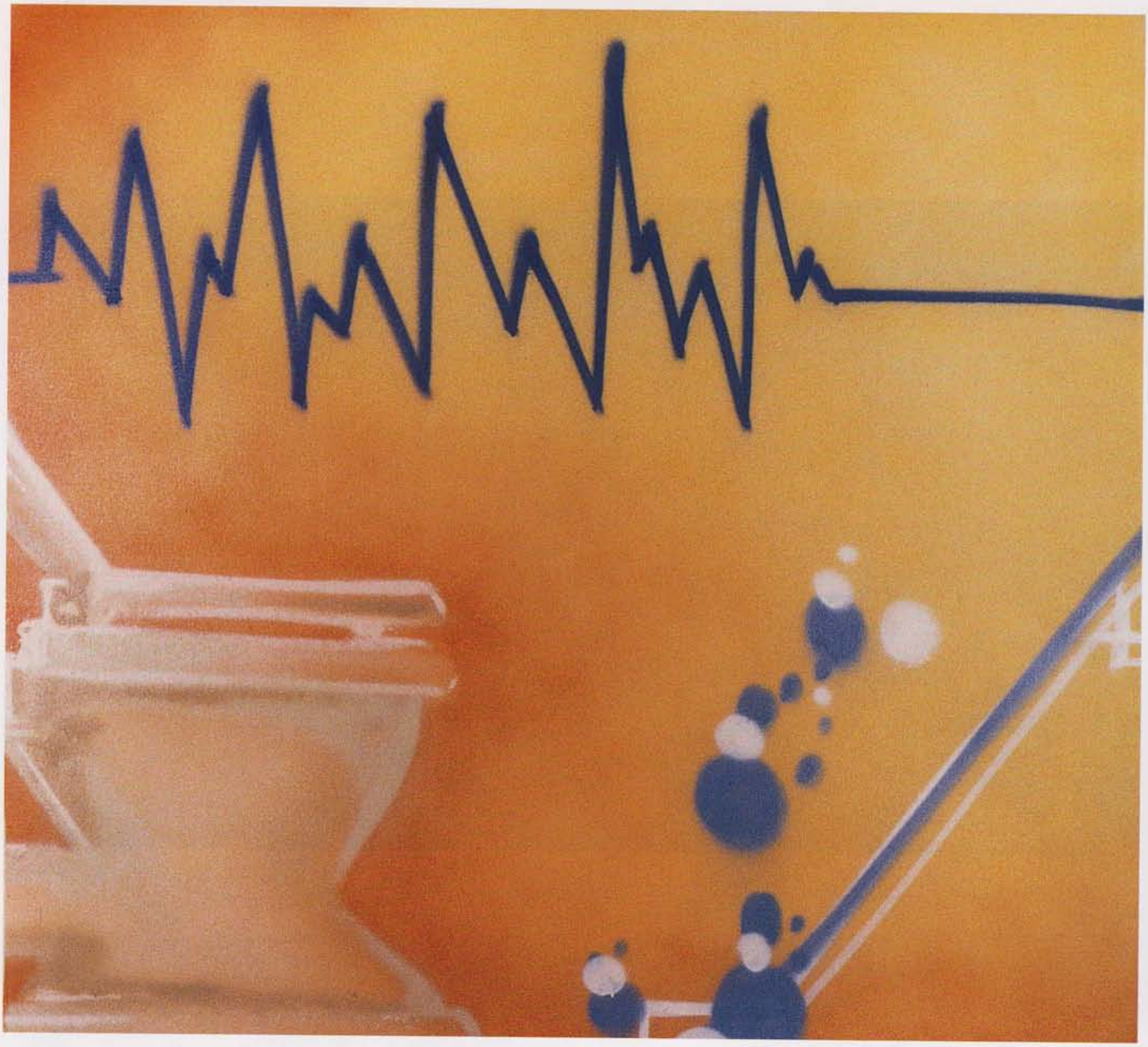


Dondi 1980
enamel spray paint on canvas
54" × 96"
Collection Samuel Esses

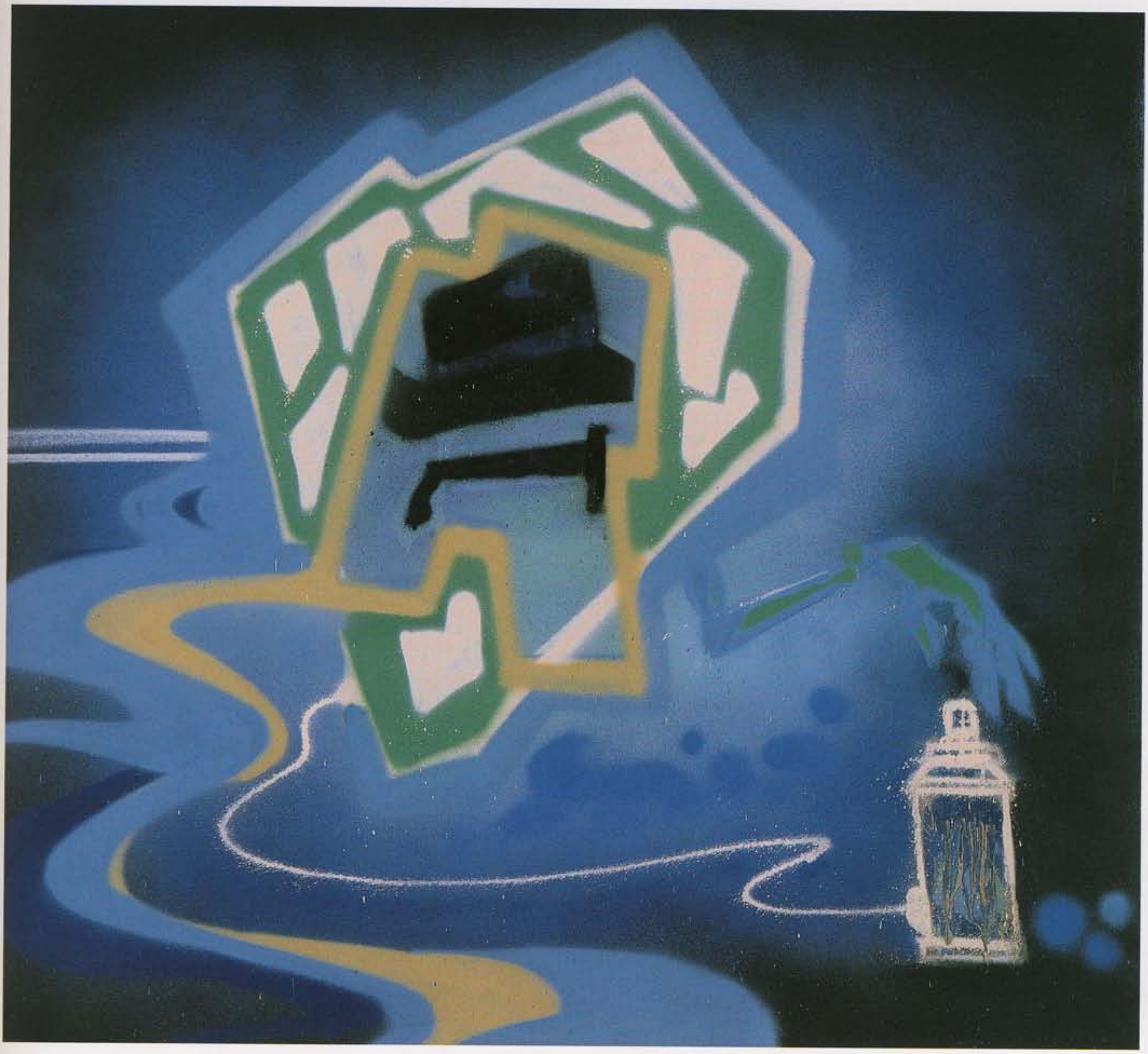




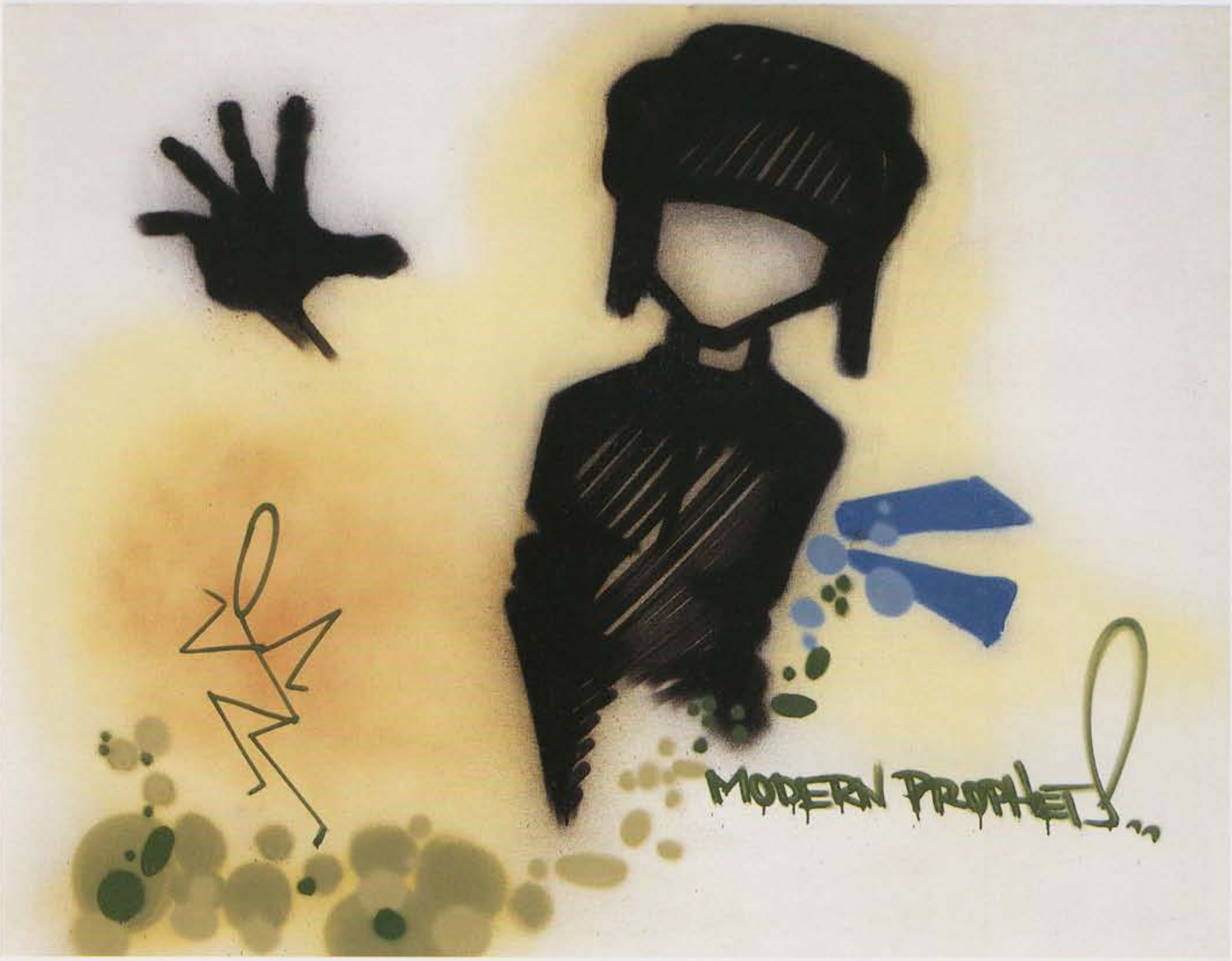
Bus 1980
enamel spray paint on canvas
54" x 96"
Collection Samuel Esses



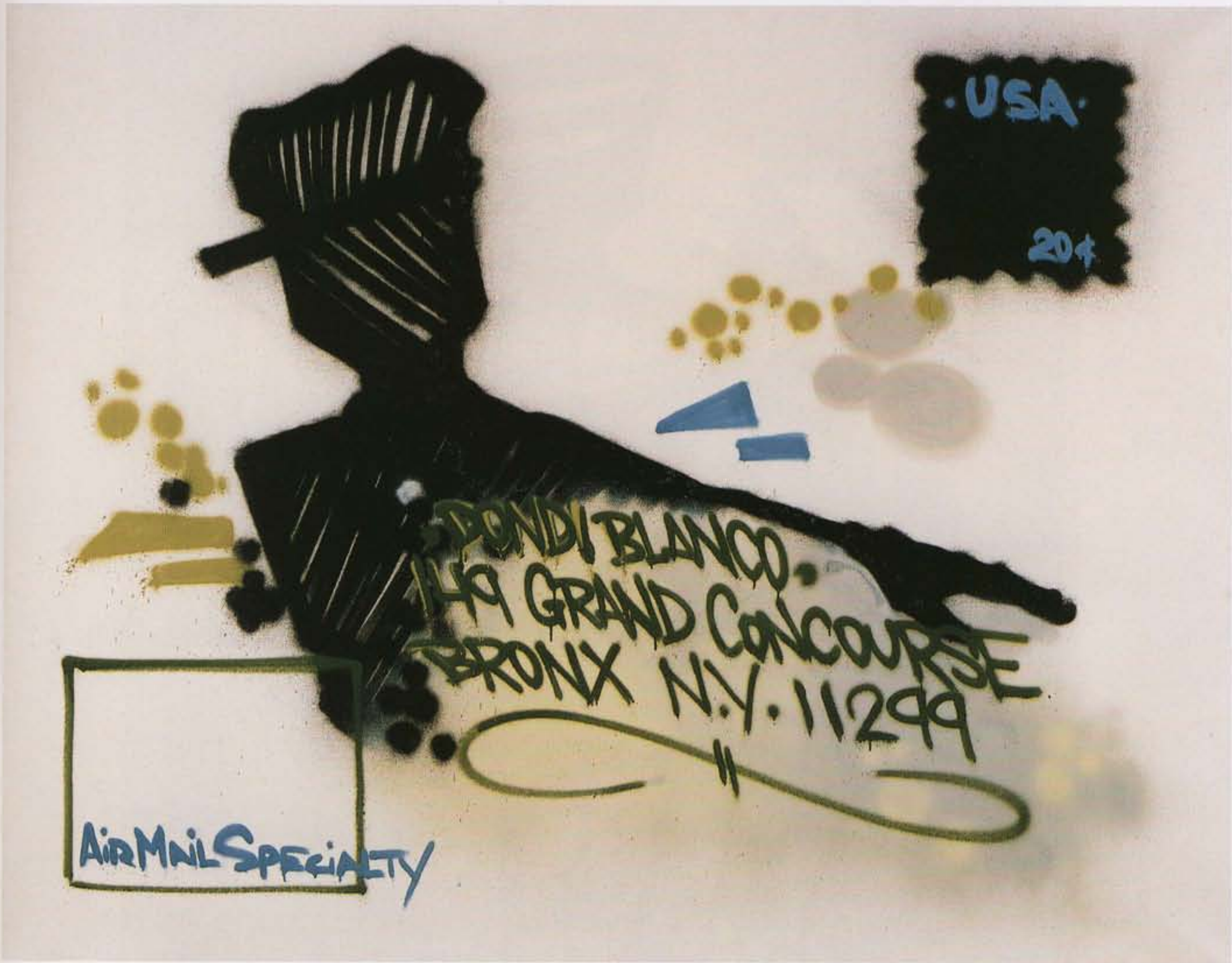
Psychological Suspense 1981
enamel spray paint on canvas
48" × 52"
Private Collection



Operation Input 1982
enamel spray paint on canvas
48" x 52"
Collection Henk & Leonie Pijnenburg, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop


MODERN PROPHETS

Modern Prophets 1983
enamel spray paint on canvas
52" x 67"
Collection Gemeente Museum Helmond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DONDI BLANCO
149 GRAND CONCOURSE
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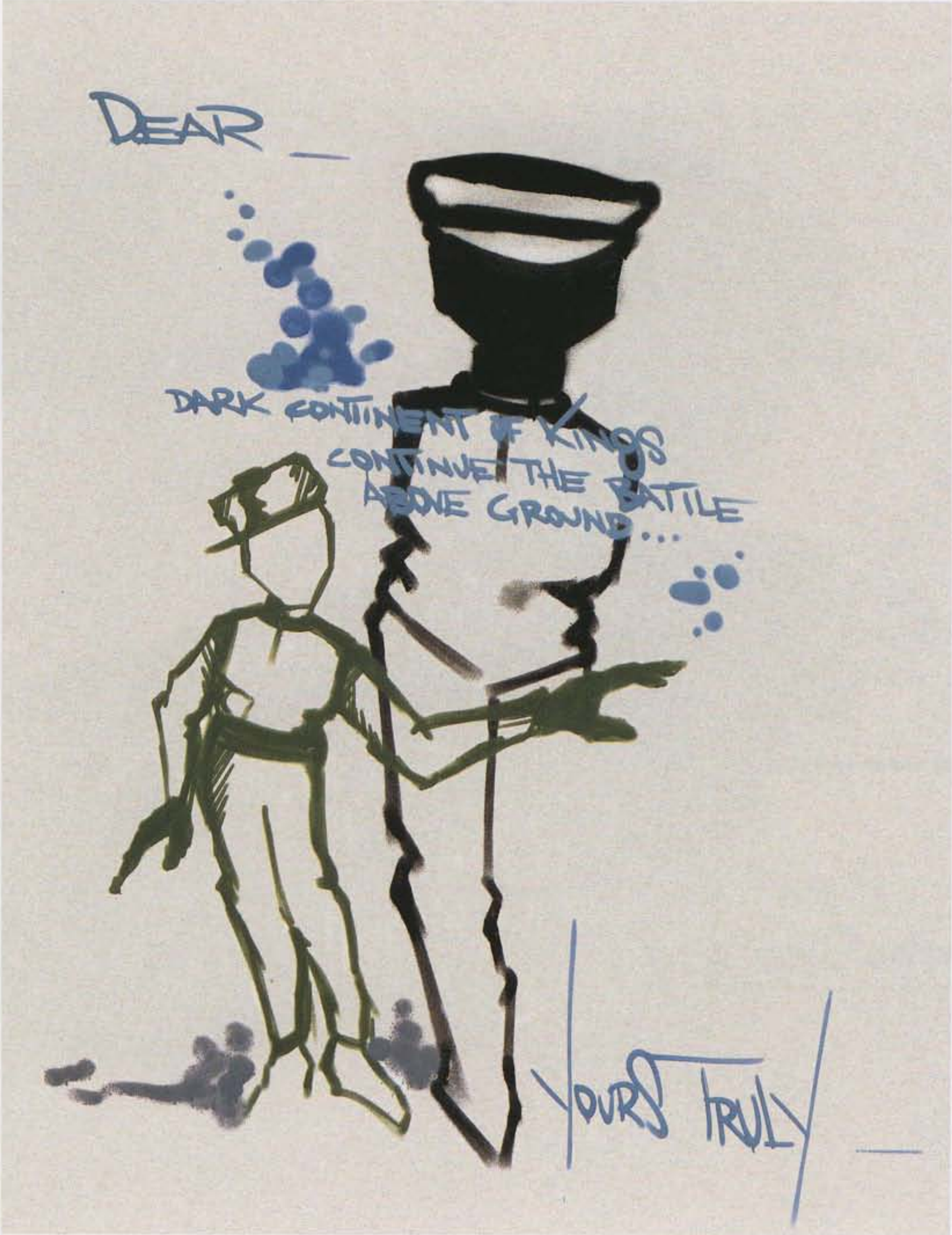
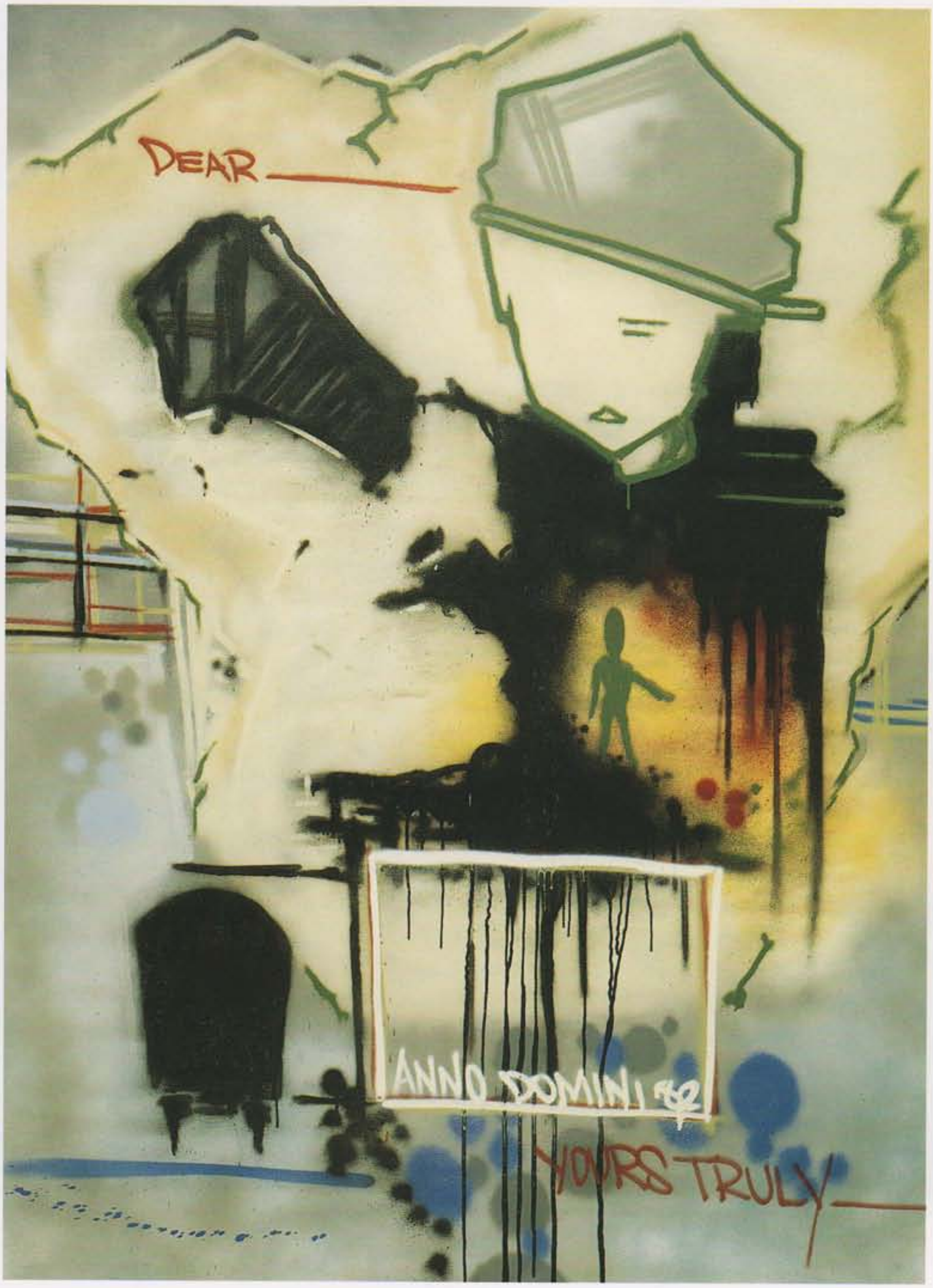
AirMail Specialty

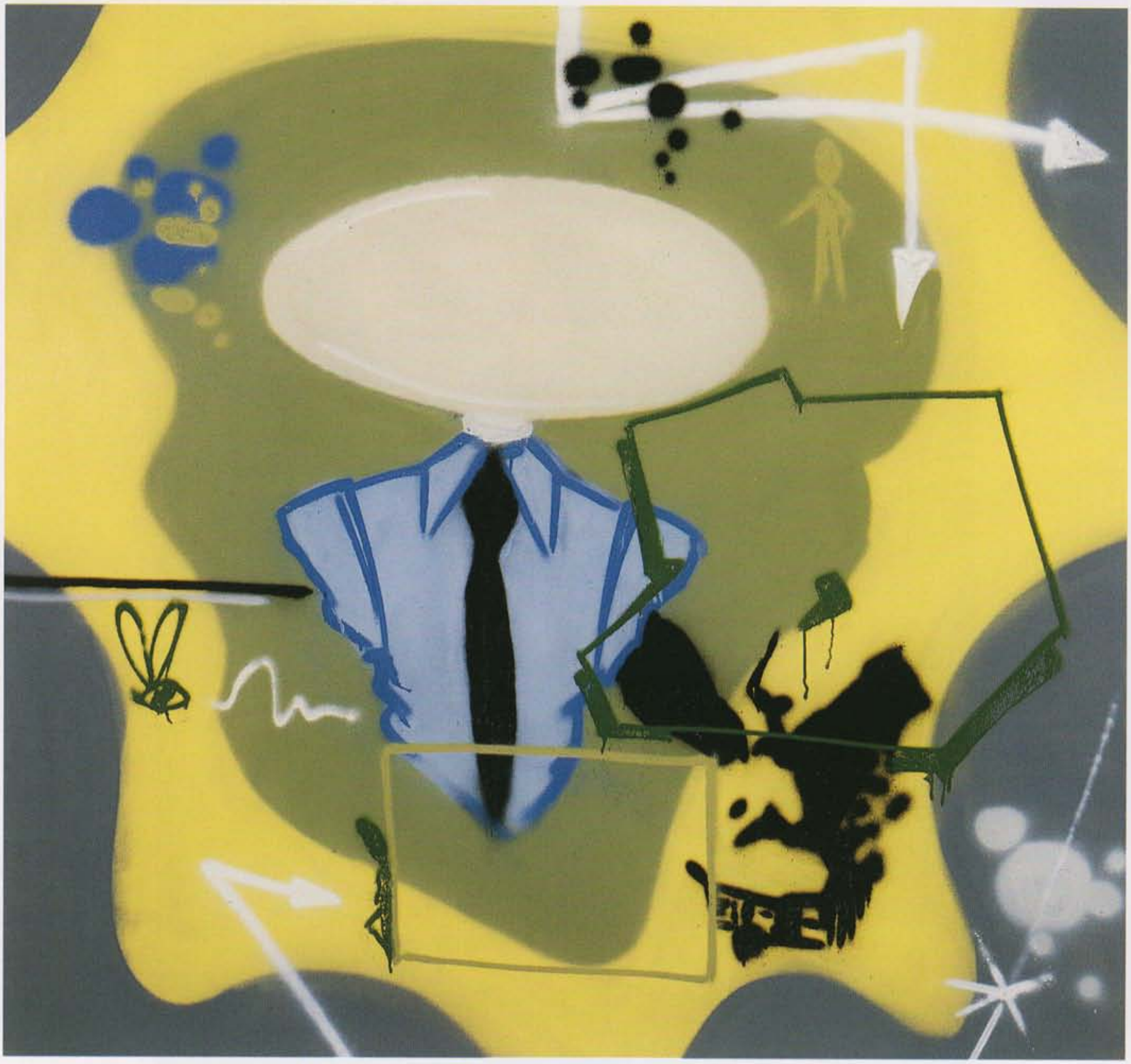
Dondi Blanco 1983
enamel spray paint on canvas
52" x 67"
Collection Henk & Leonie Pijnenburg, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop


DEAR —
DARK CONTINENT OF KINGS
CONTINUE THE BATTLE
ABOVE GROUND...
YOURS TRULY —

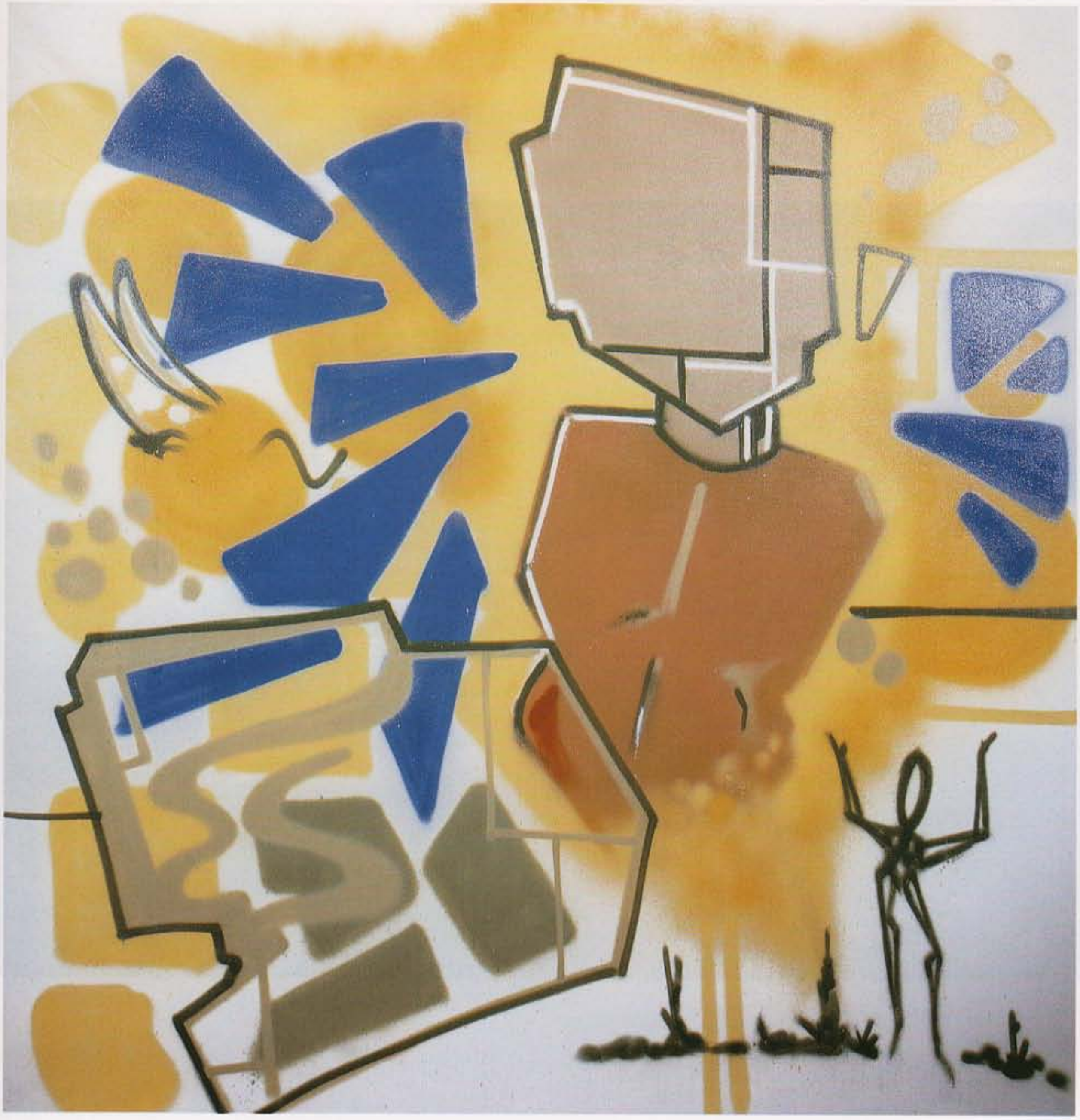
Dark Continent of Kings 1983
enamel spray paint on canvas
70" x 52"
Collection Henk and Leonie Pijnenburg, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop


DEAR
ANNO DOMINI '82
YOURS TRULY

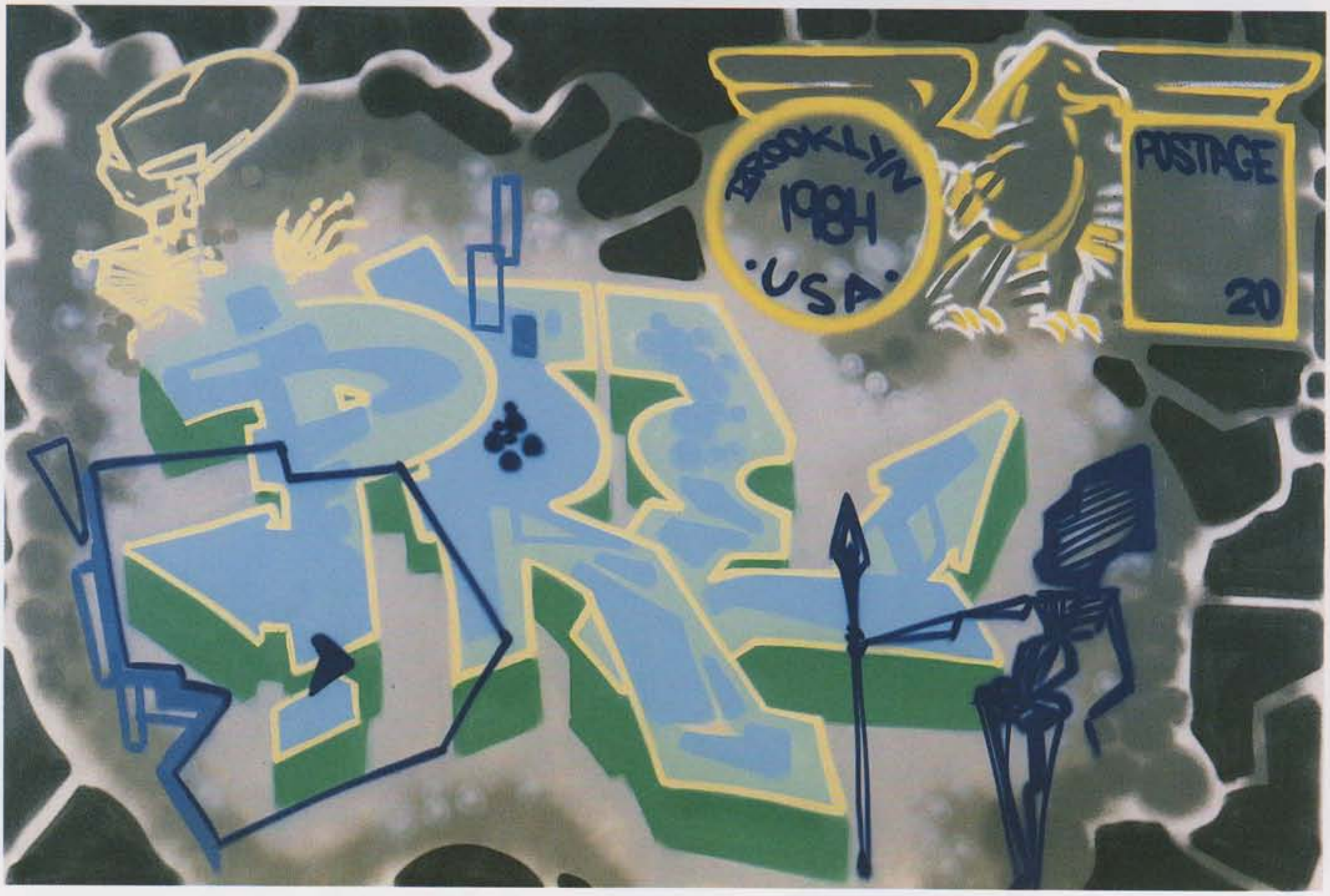
Anno Domini 1982
enamel spray paint on canvas
70" x 52"
Collection Allard Wildenberg, The Netherlands
photo: David van Dijk



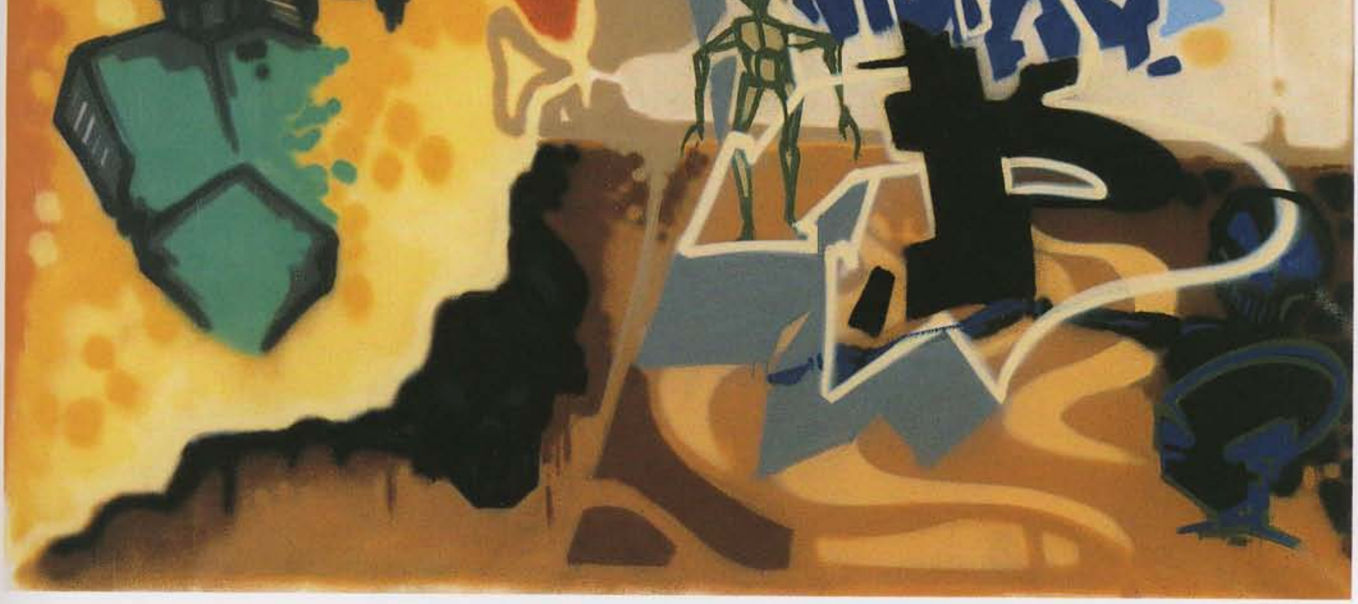
Untitled 1983
enamel spray paint on canvas
52" x 55"
Collection Carel & Tanneke Balth, The Netherlands
photo: Tom Haartsen



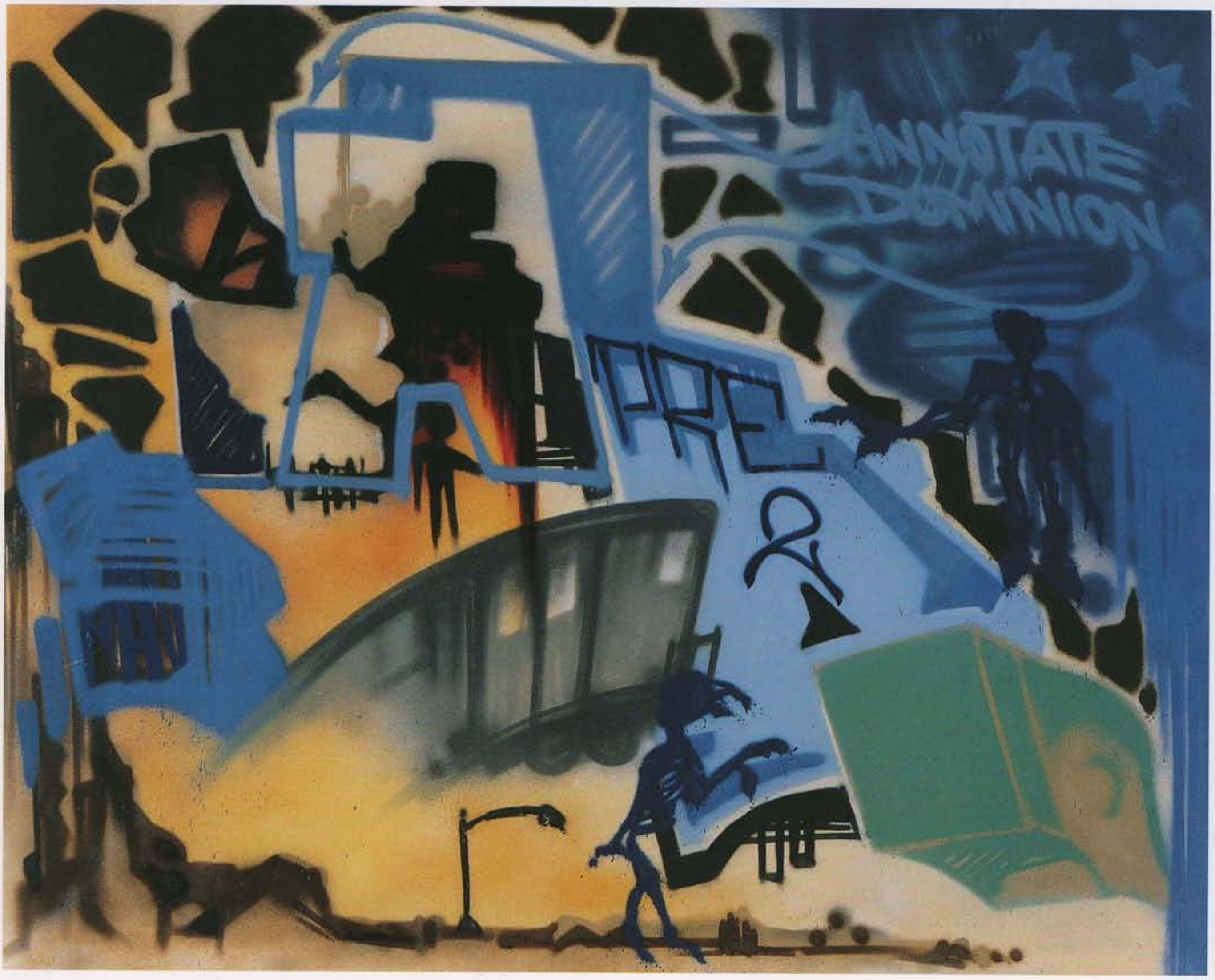
Child in Turmoil 1984
enamel spray paint on canvas
73" × 71"
Private Collection, The Netherlands
photo: Ton Hartjes


BROOKLYN
1984
·USA·
POSTAGE
20

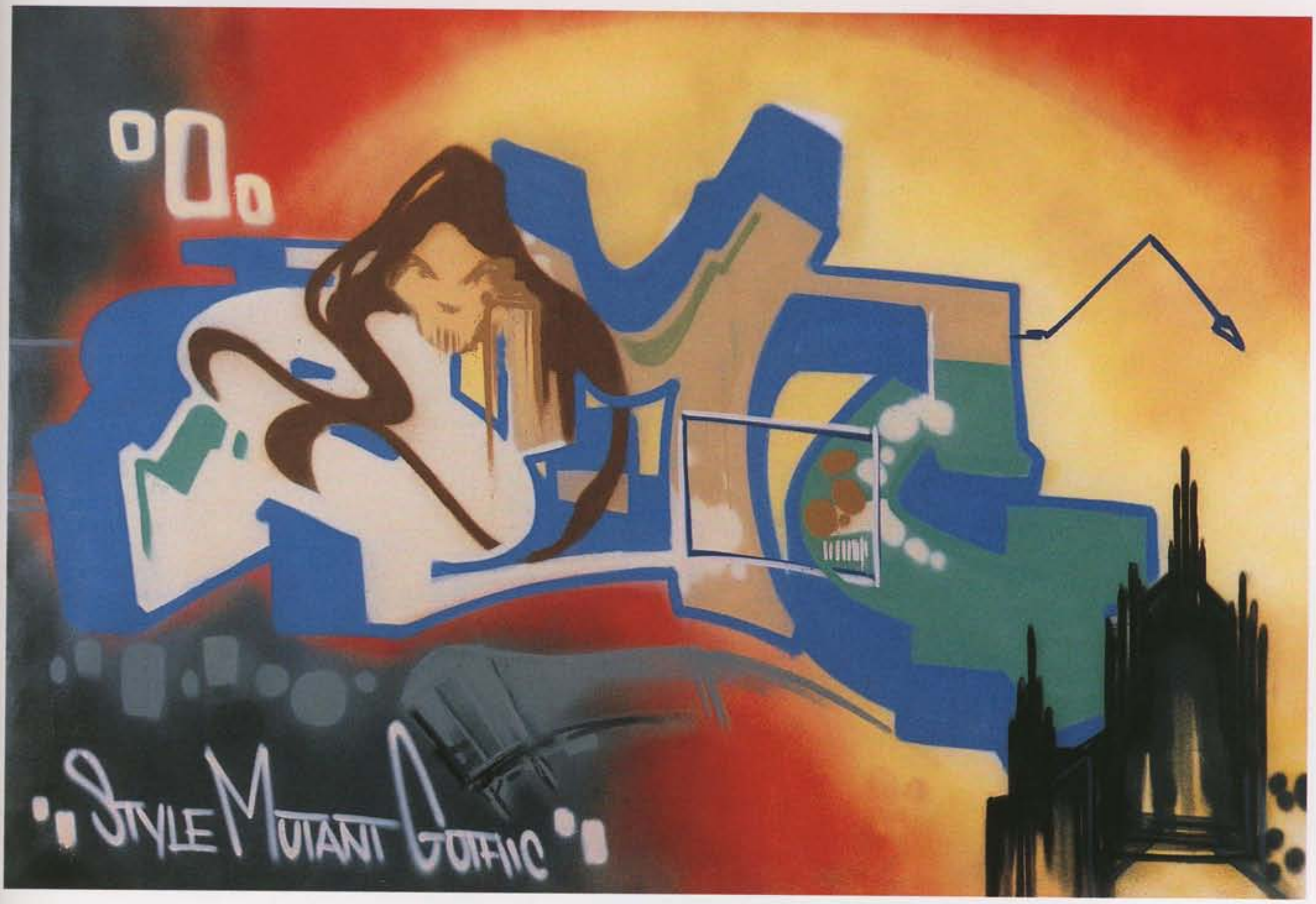
Pre Postage 1984–1985
enamel spray paint on canvas
69" x 112"
Collection Max and Chella Rens, The Netherlands



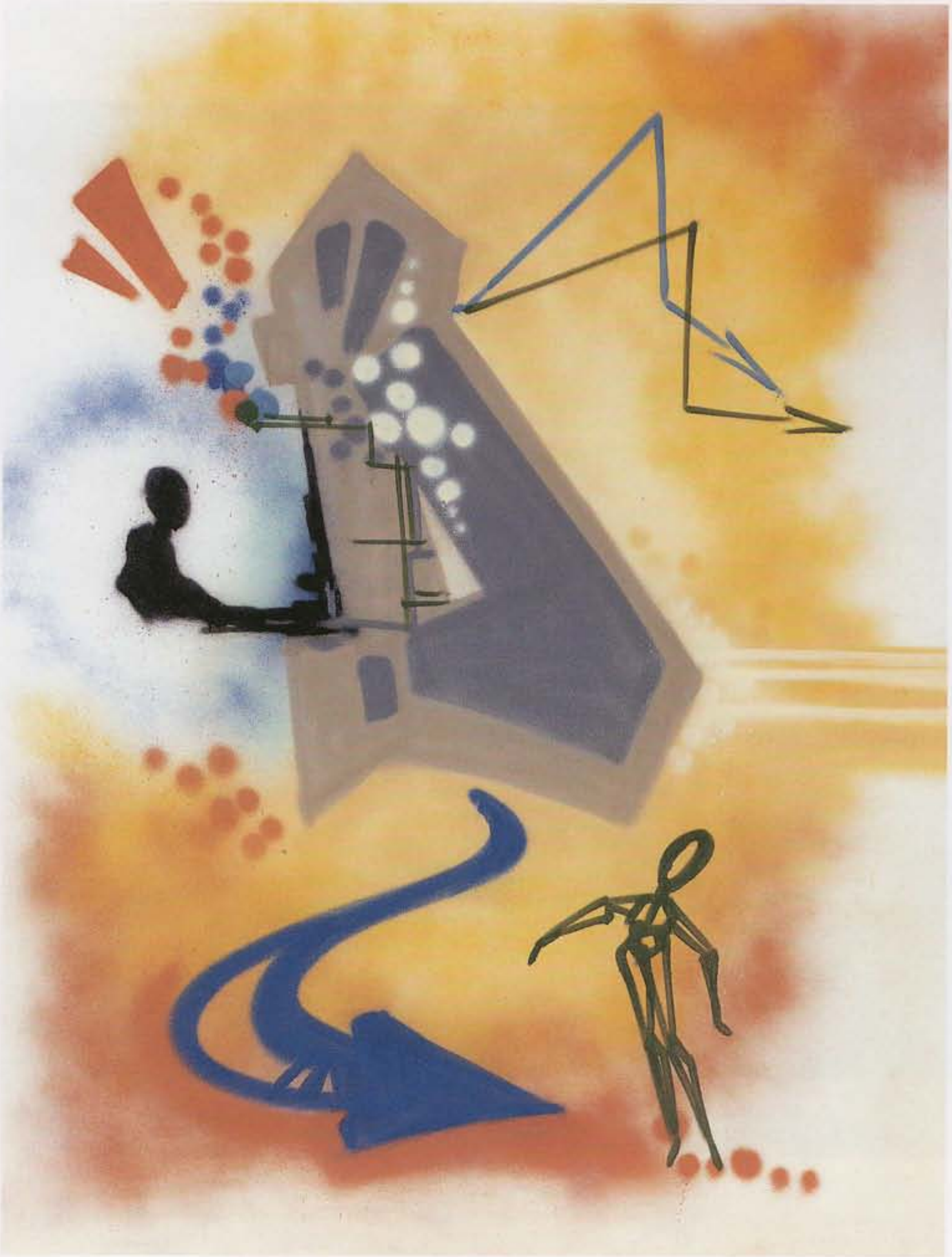
Bishop of Battle 1985
enamel spray paint on canvas
69" x 100"
Private Collection, The Netherlands
photo: Ton Hartjes


ANNOTATE
DOMINION
PRE
2

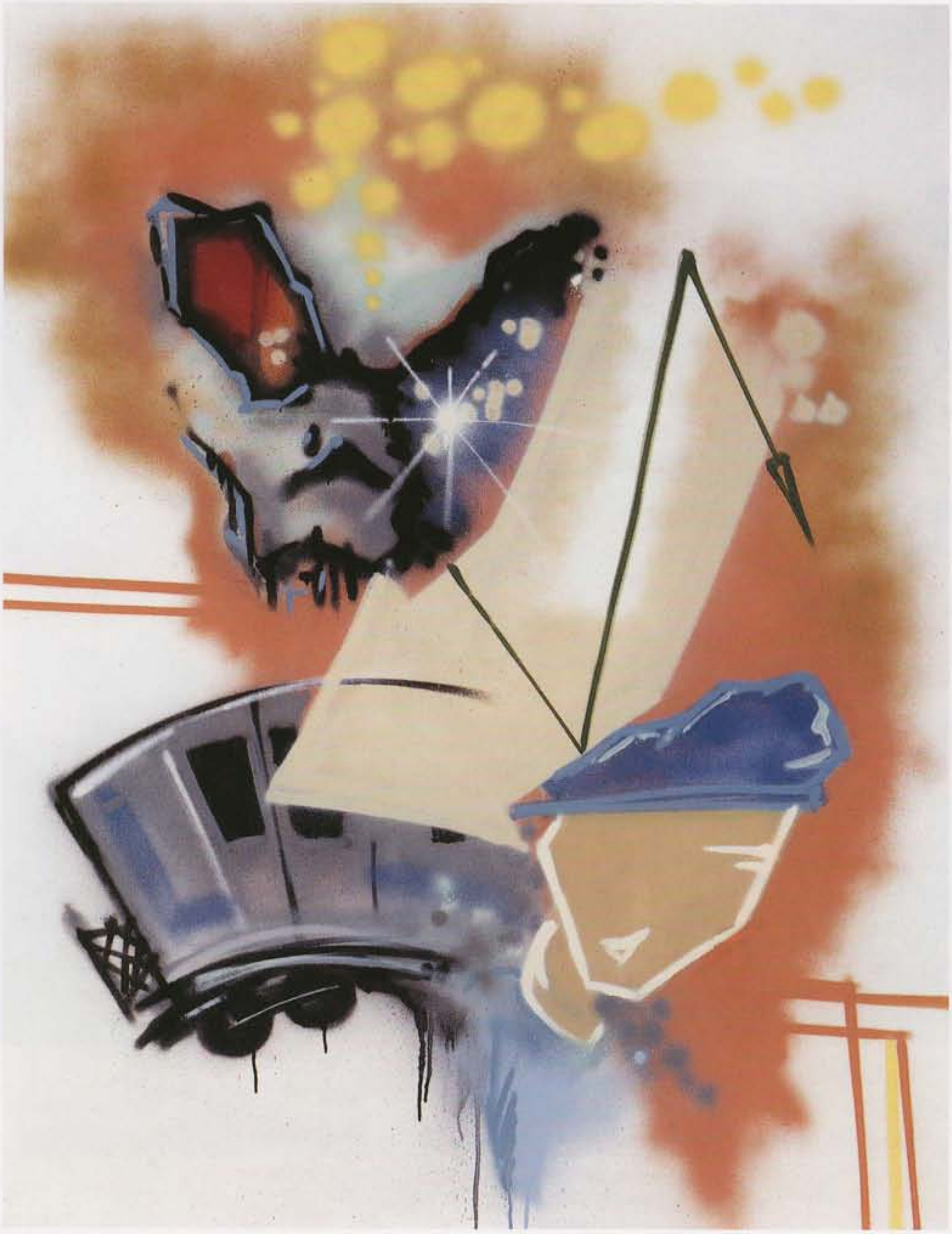
Pre Annotate Dominion 1982
enamel spray paint on canvas
57" × 70"
Collection Max and Chella Rens, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop


Style Mutant Gothic

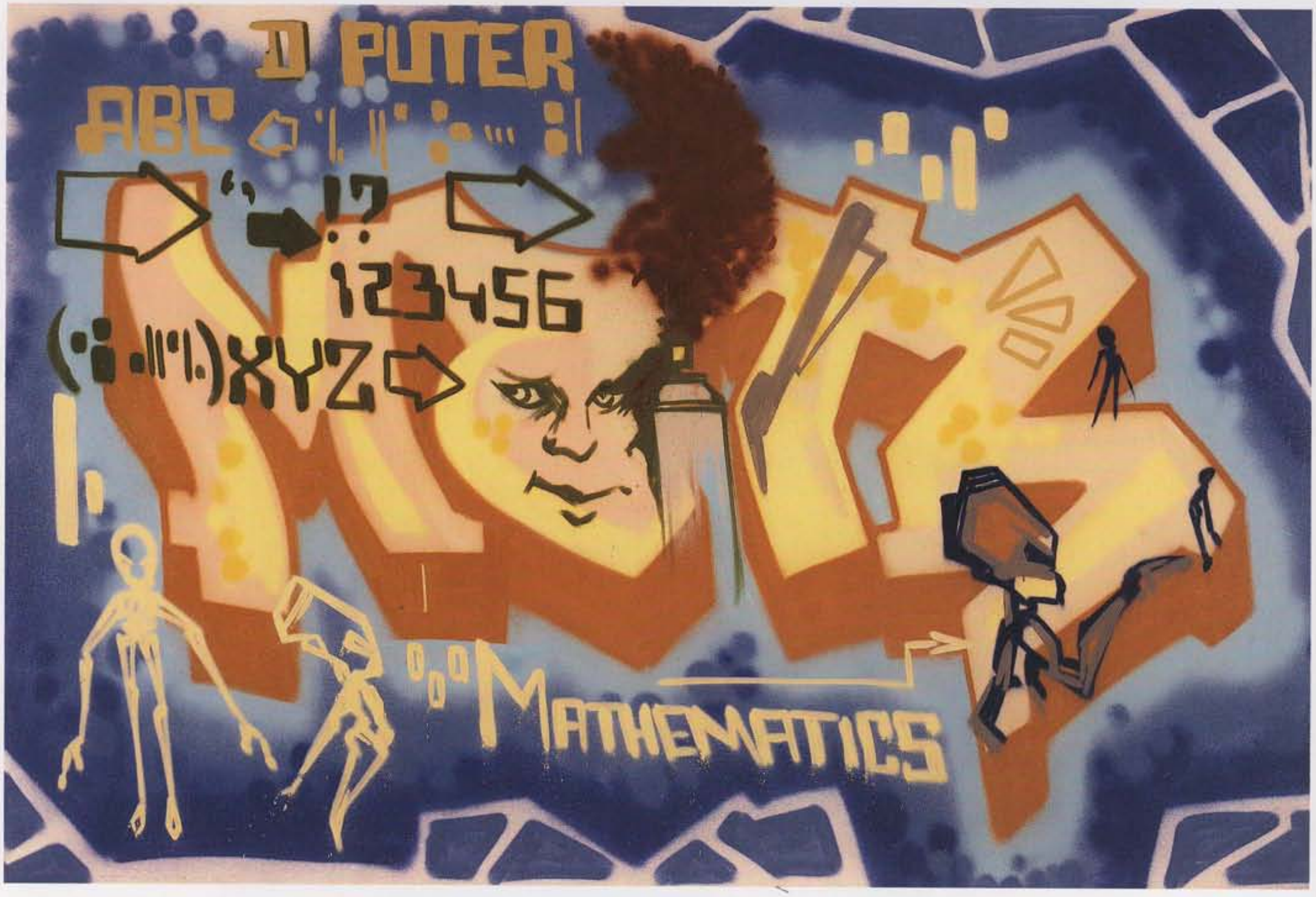
Style Mutant Gothic 1985
enamel spray paint on canvas
69" x 102"
Private Collection, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop



Panzer Defense 1986
enamel spray paint on canvas
68" x 52"
Collection Galerie Thomas, Munich



Vger Goes Public 1986
enamel spray paint on canvas
68" x 52"
Collection Galerie Thomas, Munich


D PUTER
ABC
!?
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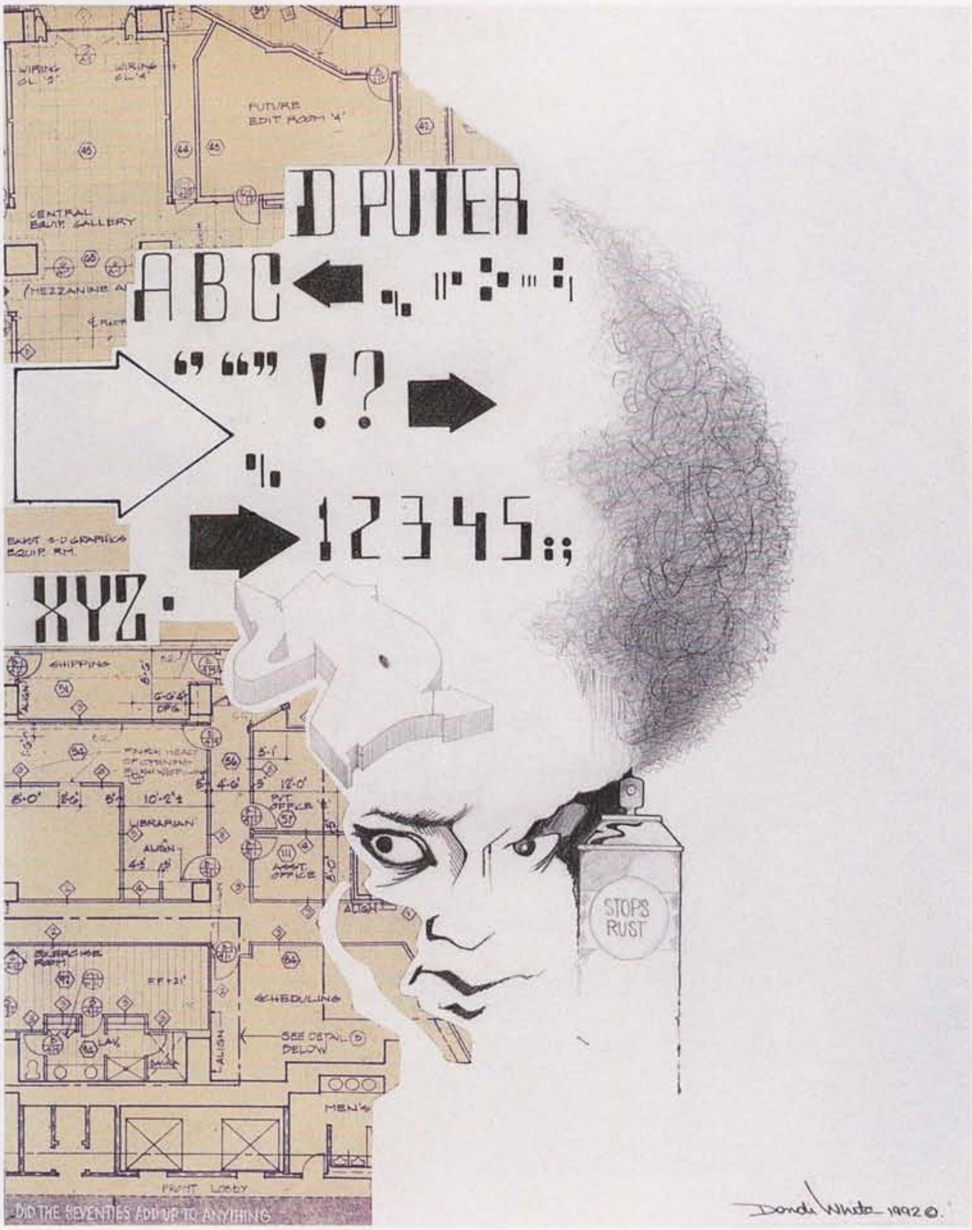
MATHEMATICS

Mathematics 1984–1985
enamel spray paint on canvas
70" × 102"
Collection Henk & Leonie Pijnenburg, The Netherlands
photo: Martin Stoop


D PUTER
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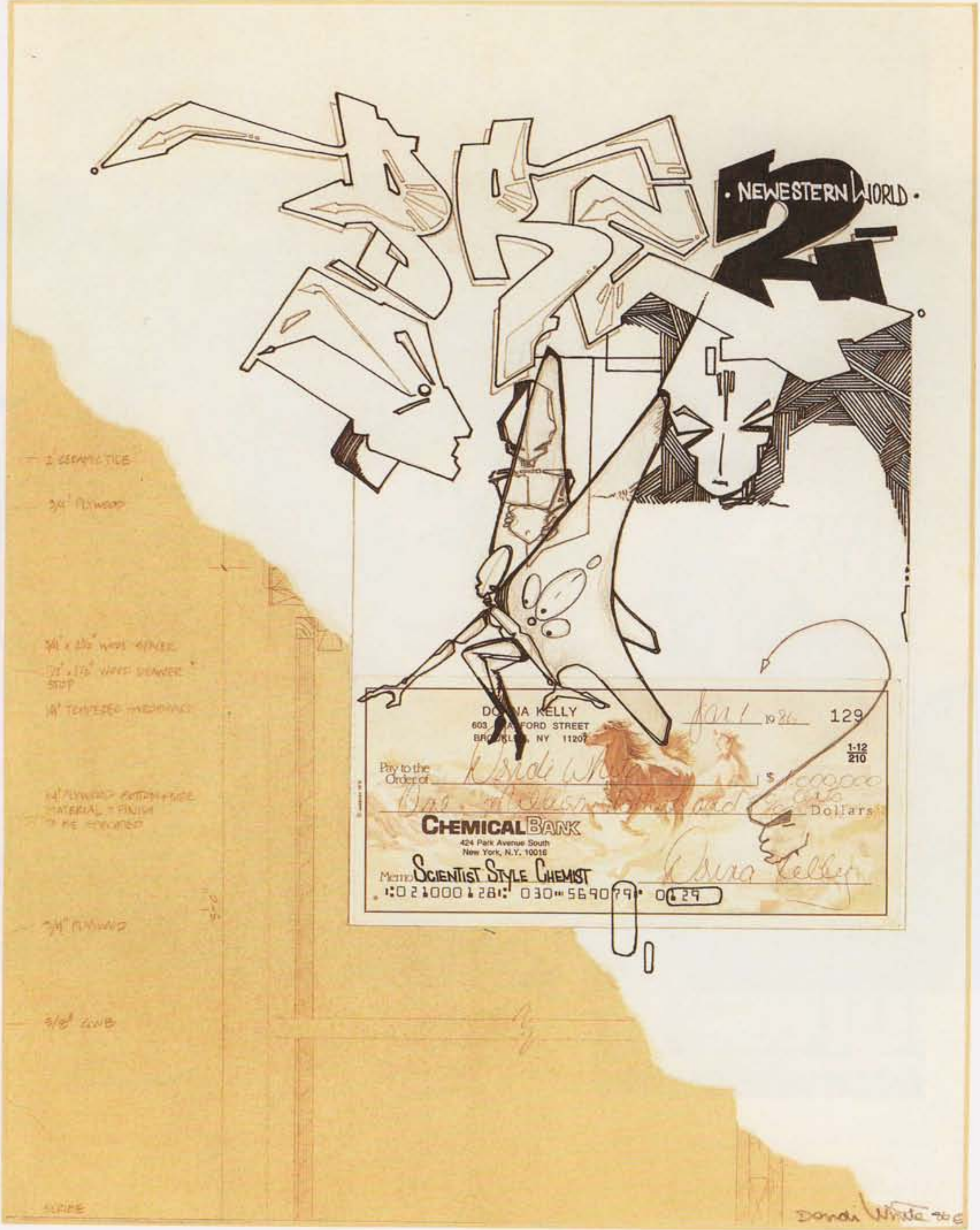
STOPS RUST
DID THE SEVENTIES ADD UP TO ANYTHING
FUTURE EDIT ROOM '4'
CENTRAL EQUIP. GALLERY
SHIPPING
LIBRARIAN
SCHEDULING
SEE DETAIL BELOW
MEN'S
FRONT LOBBY
Dondi White 1992©

Did the Seventies Add Up to Anything 1992
ink, pencil, collage on paper
14" x 11"
Private Collection


· NEWESTERN WORLD ·
DONNA KELLY
603 ... FORD STREET
BROOKLYN, NY 11207
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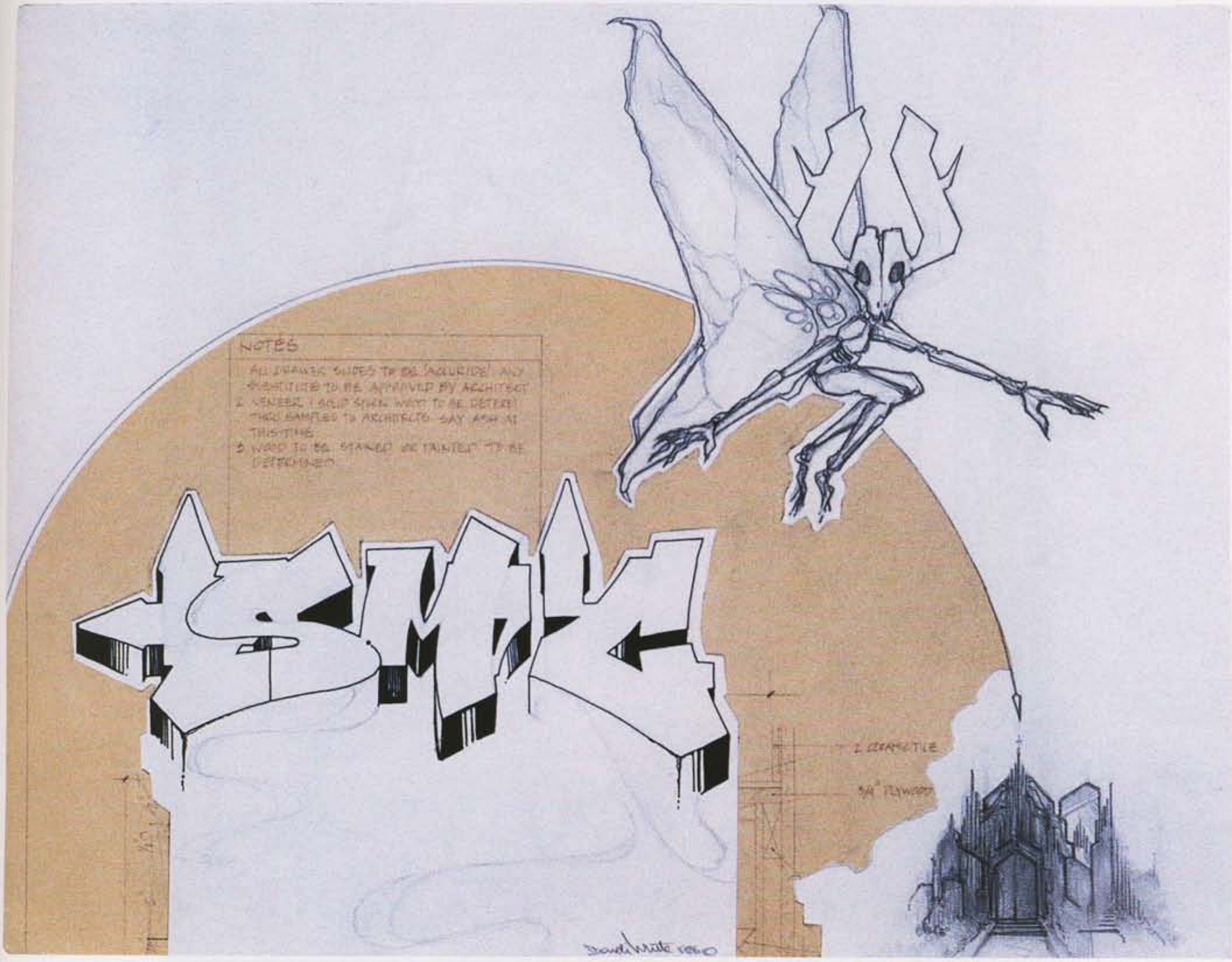
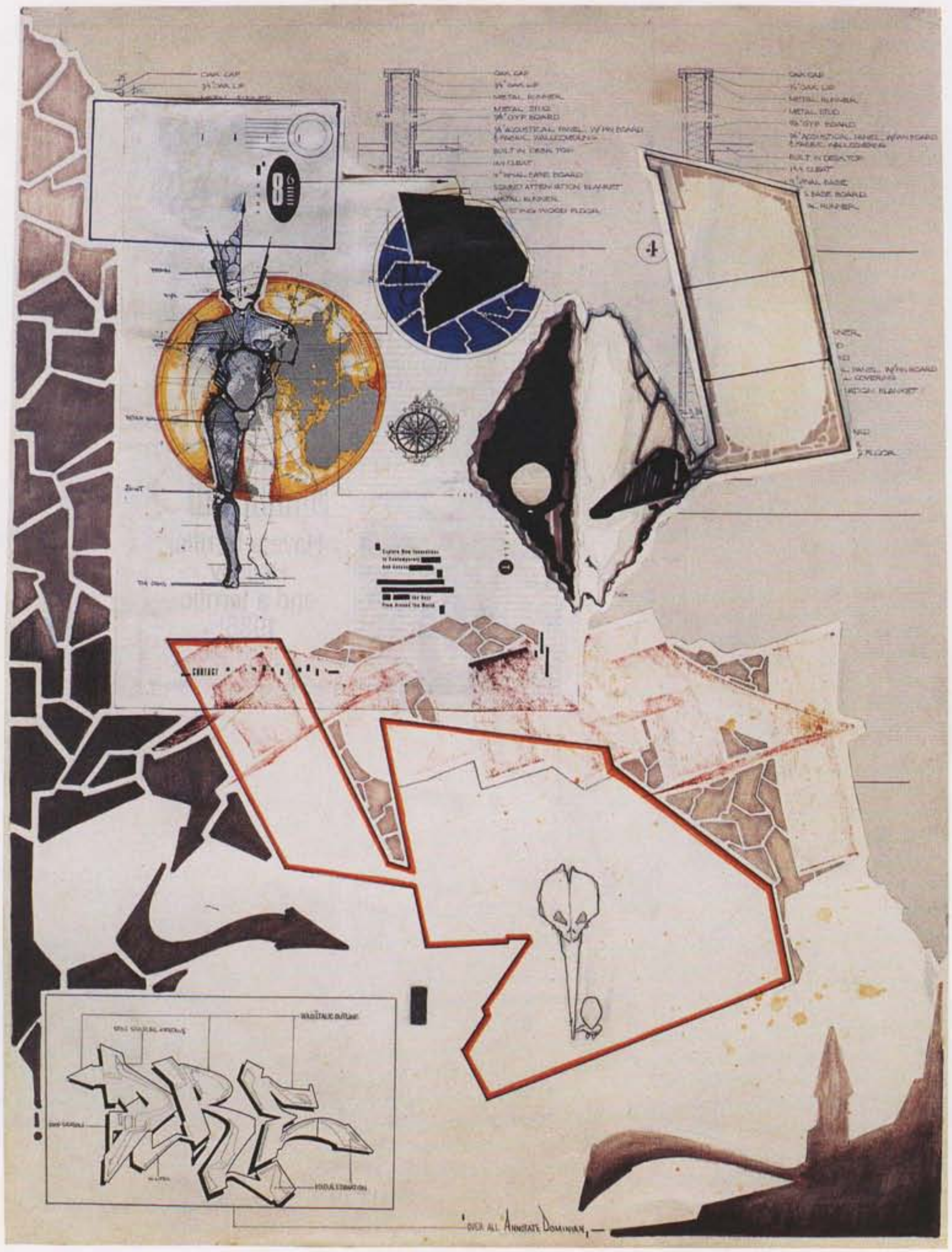
Pay to the Order of
$
Dollars
CHEMICAL BANK
424 Park Avenue South
New York, N.Y. 10016
Memo SCIENTIST STYLE CHEMIST
⑆021000128⑆ 030⑈569079⑈ 0129

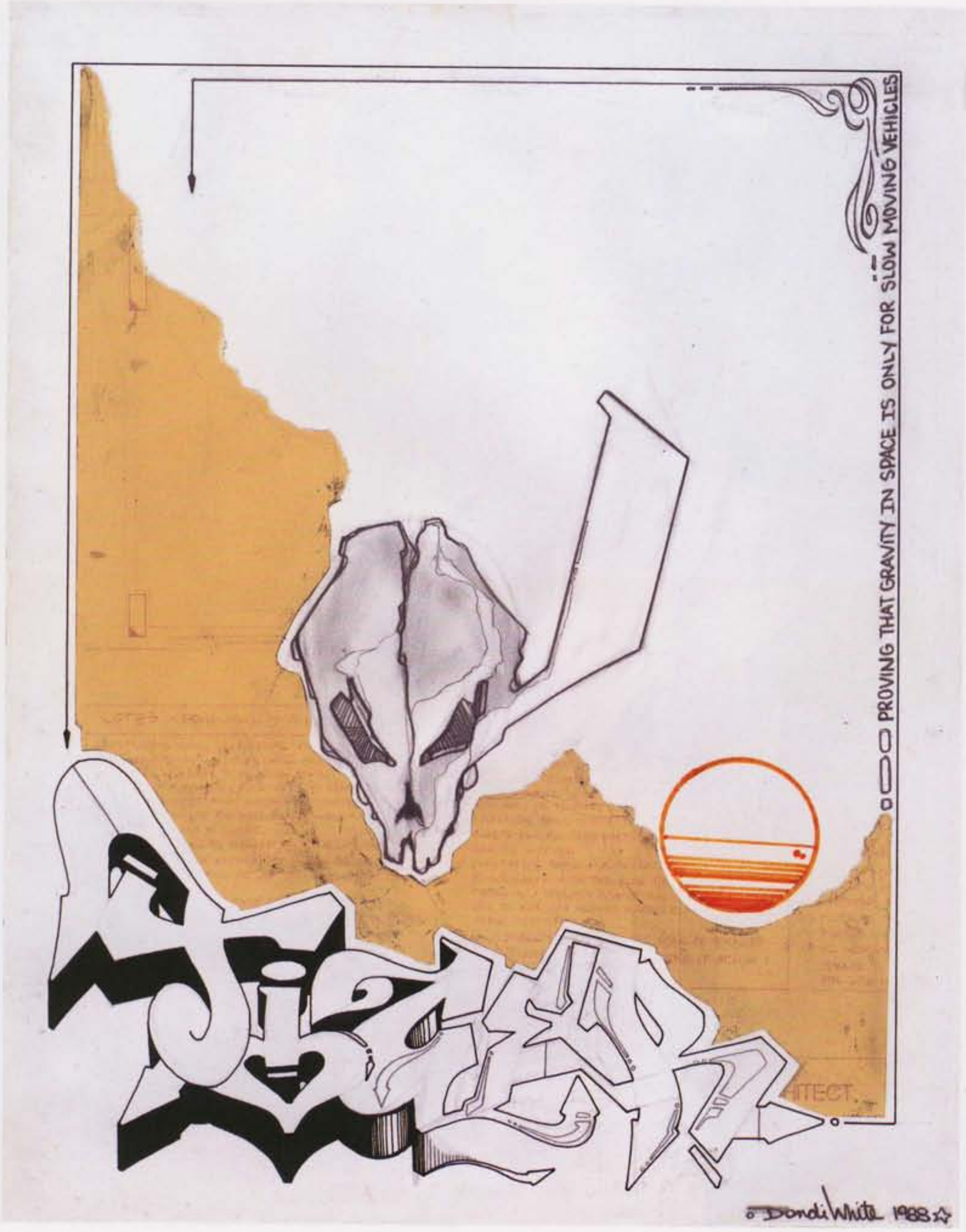
New Western World 1986
ink, pencil, collage on paper
14" x 11"
Private Collection, France


NOTES
ALL DRAWER SLIDES TO BE 'ACCURIDE' ANY SUBSTITUTE TO BE APPROVED BY ARCHITECT
2. VENEER / SOLID STAIN WOOD TO BE DETERMINED THRU SAMPLES TO ARCHITECTS. SAY ASH AT THIS TIME
3. WOOD TO BE STAINED OR PAINTED TO BE DETERMINED
2 CERAMIC TILE
3/4" PLYWOOD

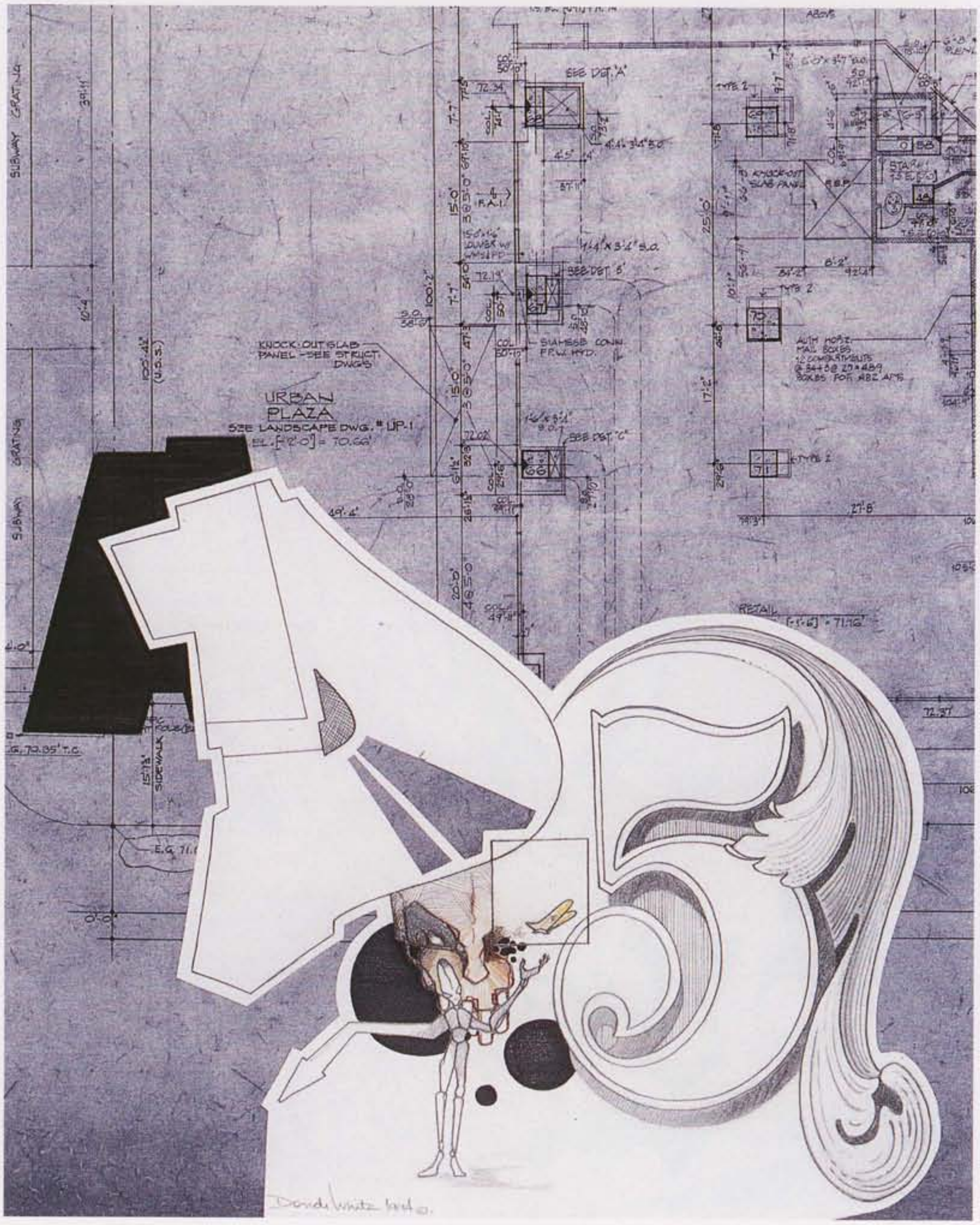
Notes 1986
ink, pencil, collage on paper
11" x 14"
Private Collection


4
OVER ALL ANNOTATE DOMINION

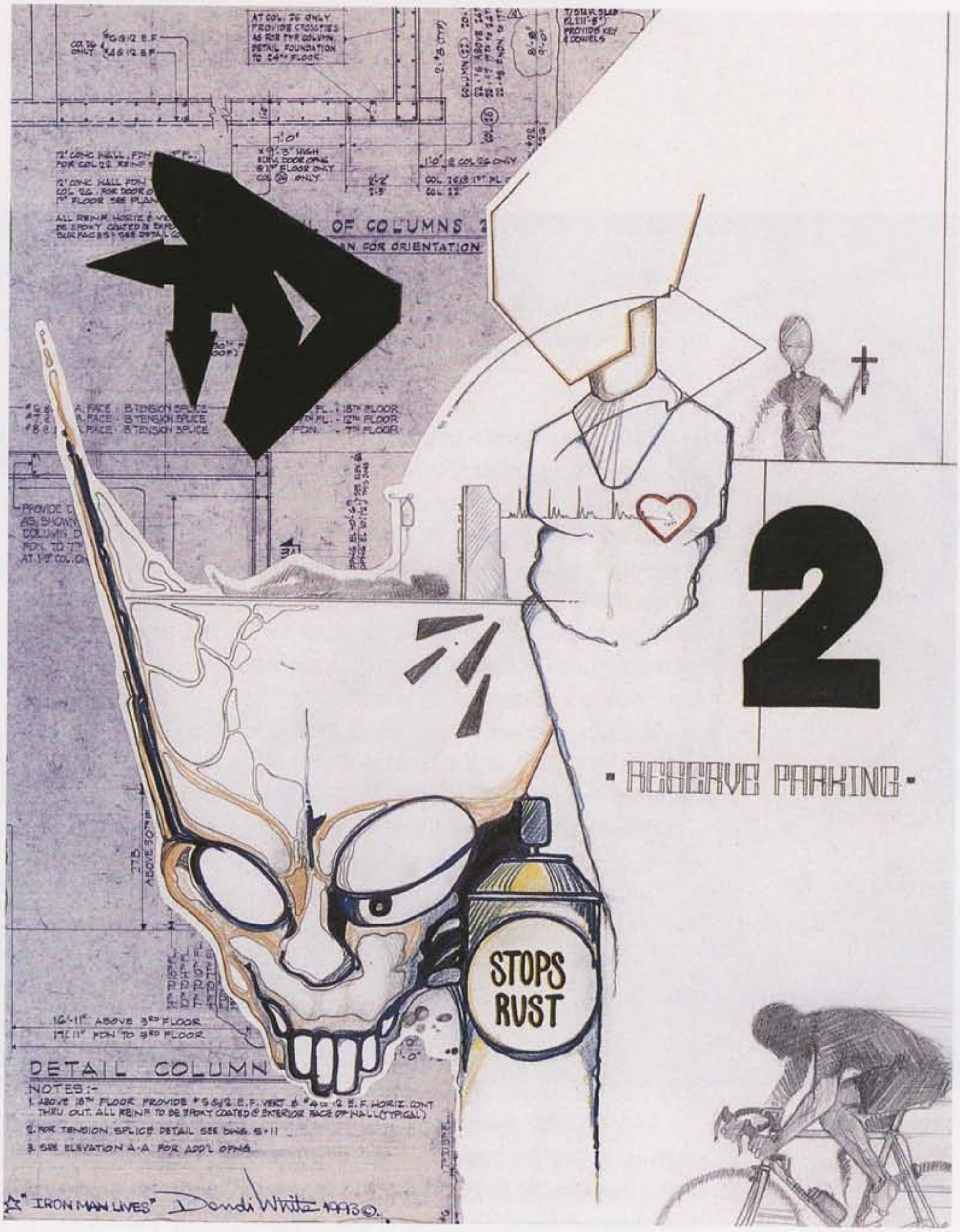
Over All Annotate Dominion 1988
ink, pencil, marker, collage on paper
30" x 23"
Collection Henk & Leonie Pijnenburg, The Netherlands
photo: Michael de Kok


PROVING THAT GRAVITY IN SPACE IS ONLY FOR SLOW MOVING VEHICLES
ITECT.
Dondi White 1988

Tiger 1988
ink, pencil, marker, collage on paper
18" x 14"
Collection Joan Waltemath


SUBWAY GRATING
KNOCK-OUT SLAB PANEL - SEE STRUCT. DWGS
URBAN PLAZA
SEE LANDSCAPE DWG. # LP-1
SIDEWALK
RETAIL
SEE DET. 'A'
SIAMESE CONN. FR.W. HYD.

Untitled 1994
ink, pencil, collage on paper
14" x 11"
Private Collection


OF COLUMNS 2
FOR ORIENTATION
2
• RESERVE PARKING •
STOPS RUST
DETAIL COLUMN
NOTES:-
1. ABOVE 18TH FLOOR PROVIDE #5 & 12 E.F. VERT. & #4 @ 12 E.F. HORIZ. CONT THRU OUT. ALL REINF TO BE EPOXY COATED @ EXTERIOR FACE OF WALL (TYPICAL)
2. FOR TENSION SPLICE DETAIL SEE DWG. S-11
3. SEE ELEVATION A-A FOR ADD'L OPNG.
16'-11" ABOVE 3RD FLOOR
17'-11" FDN TO 3RD FLOOR
"IRON MAN LIVES" Dondi White 1993©.

Iron Man Lives 1993
ink, pencil, collage on paper
14" x 11"
Private Collection

MARTHA COOPER AND THE RADIANT CHILDREN, 1979

We didn't wake up one day and decide we wanted to be famous. After all, in our way, we were already famous. The media was looking around for the next "cool" thing, and they chose graffiti.
–Zephyr

Graffiti writers commonly scanned the backgrounds of movies, TV shows, and news reports for the appearance of their names. In October 1978, Dondi and Hurst hit pay dirt when a photo of a youngster on a swing appeared on the cover of the *New York Post*. Lo and behold, OI (Hurst's throw-up name) and NC (one of Dondi's throw-up names) were clearly visible on the wall behind the child. Dondi clipped the photo and pasted it into his sketchbook. In a bizarre twist, in 1979, the photographer responsible for the photo—Martha Cooper—appeared on Dondi's front stoop, through an unrelated course of events.

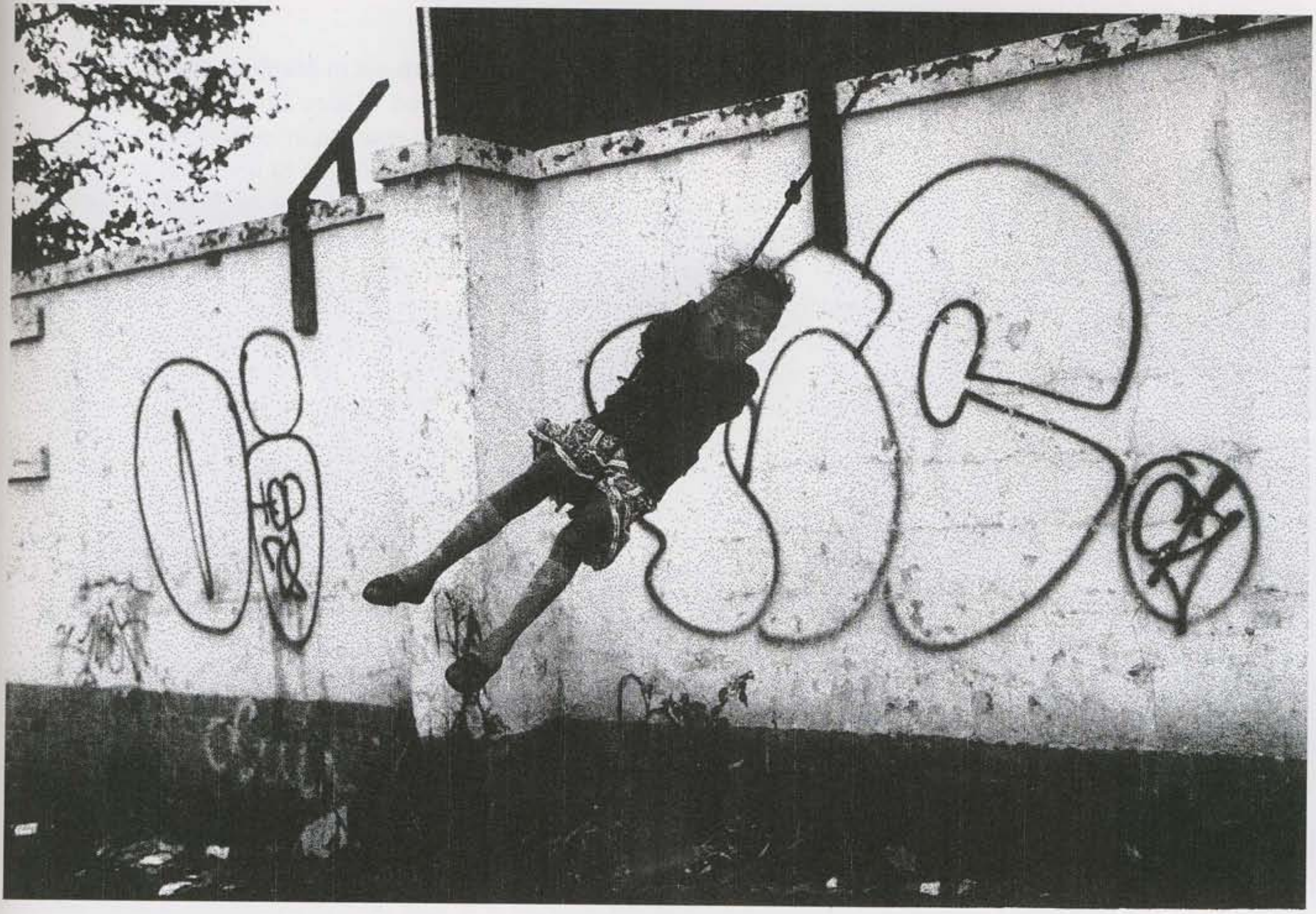
Ms. Cooper was fascinated by Dondi, his incredible work, and the "graffiti lifestyle," and began documenting Brooklyn's reigning aerosol king. On the night of May 31, 1980, Dondi brought Ms. Cooper to the New Lots train yard, where she photographed Dondi painting the now-legendary whole-car *Children of the Grave, Part 3.*

Graffiti writers are a secret society. Bringing a media-savvy photographer to the yards was risky. Like painting the roof, it was another unorthodox Dondi choice—the photos of him in the yard exposed his method, location, and process.

But Dondi felt something looming—a presage of the shape of things to come. Somehow, he appeared to know that the writer's secret world was about to be blown wide open anyway—and not by him.

In 1980 the mainstream media had a graffiti feeding frenzy. Almost overnight, graffiti's young practitioners became the new, naughty darlings of the minute. At first, graffiti cropped up as the subject of exposés in downtown New York papers and on colorful backdrops in a risky new experiment called "MTV." Fictionalized graffiti writers became unlikely central figures in Hollywood films like *Beat Street* and *Dreams Don't Die*. Prestigious art galleries exhibited canvases by writers alongside "traditional" artists. Between 1980 and 1984, the media fed at the graffiti trough. The media never—and the writers rarely, if ever—considered what the fallout of all the attention might be.

The machinations of the media monster remained consistently outside the writers' control. When the ride was over, the end was abrupt and unex-



The *Post* photo
1978
photo: © Martha Cooper

pected, and the writers got off disoriented and unsure of their futures.

Writers seeking new media for exposure—fame, in the parlance of the streets—rushed giddily into the revolving doors. Not everything that came out of the attention was bad, and not everyone who participated was naive. Many brilliant and gifted writers used the exposure of the early eighties as a stepping-stone to higher places.

Despite the inherent pitfalls, Dondi managed to navigate this period flawlessly. Throughout the hubbub and hype, he demonstrated great instincts and kept his eye on his goal. It was time to explore new horizons, and the galleries beckoned . . .

Dondi painting at Esses Studios
1980

ESSES STUDIO, 1980

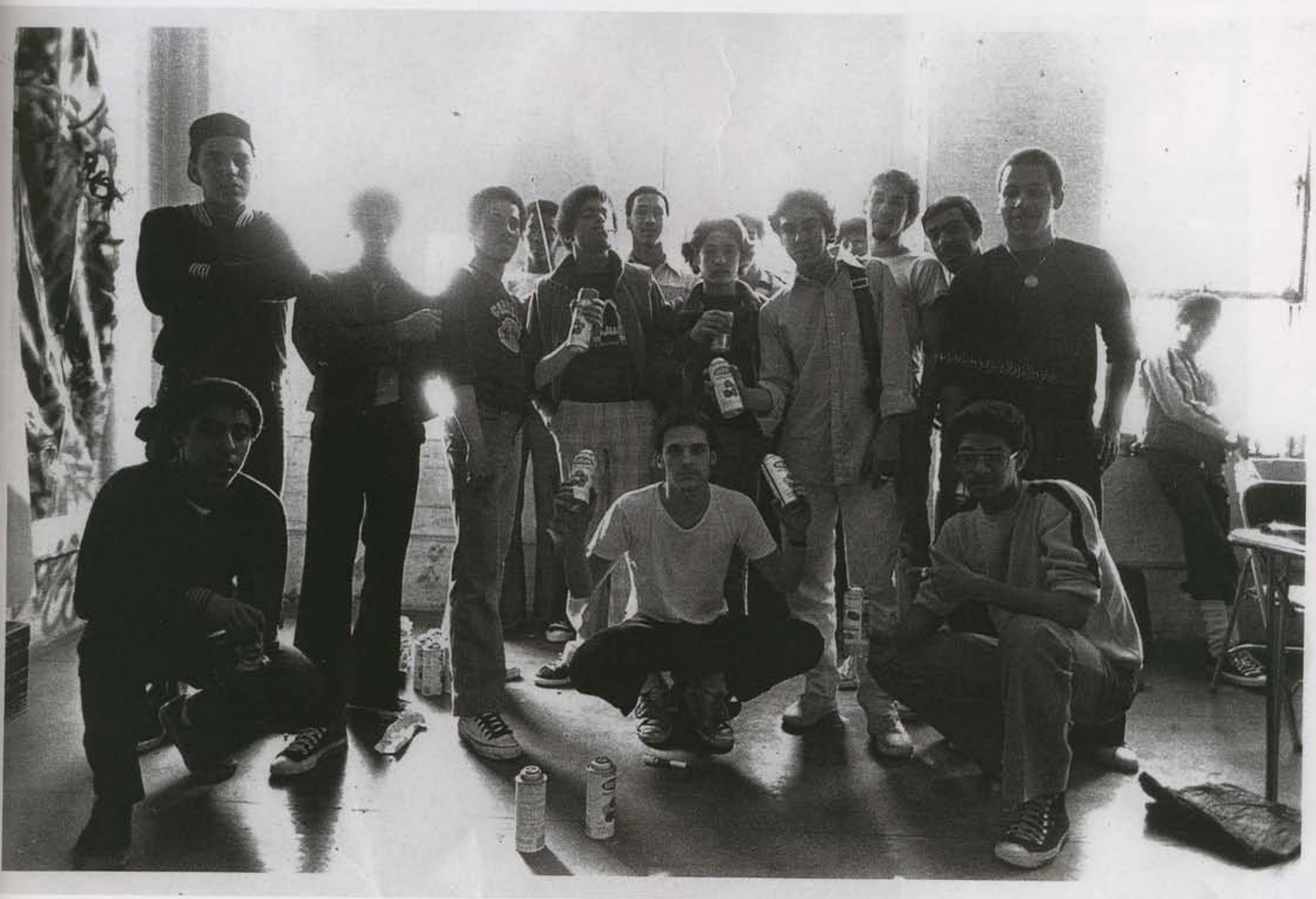
In the spring of 1980, a two-month art project in Manhattan was a major turning point for Dondi. The project, called "Esses Studio," was a painting workshop for graffiti artists. The concept was the inspiration of a collector named Samuel Esses whose simple intention was to preserve graffiti art. Pieces usually had a short life span on the trains. All painted cars were run through "the buff," an automated car wash, in an attempt to remove the graffiti. The chemicals were mostly ineffective and instead the pieces were transformed into a smeared mush of color. The Transit Authority used the lackluster results to create public confusion and further vilify graffiti.

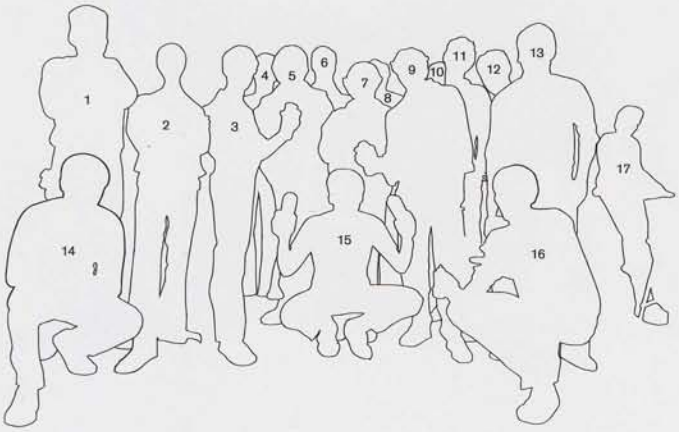
Sam Esses was passionate about the work, which he considered valid and important art. Esses hired two Manhattan-based writers, Futura and ZEPHYR, to manage the studio and oversee the project. Esses Studio opened in April 1980 to an overwhelmingly positive response. Within a week, as word of the project spread, the studio was filled to capacity with writers from every part of the city. Painting sessions went on all day and late into the night, as many of the premier names of the movement came and painted there. Over a sixty-day period, forty-seven large canvases were produced.

Dondi came to Esses and did three wonderful paintings. Although he had worked on canvas before, at Esses Studio he (as well as almost all of the other writers there) created his first large-scale canvases with spray paint.

It was an important time. Not only did Dondi connect with a number of writers who were interested in working on canvas, he also came away confident that he could successfully translate his work to other media.

The results of the studio became immediately apparent both on and off the trains. New inspirations and alliances born at the studio created a wave of fantastic new work on the trains. Off the trains, Esses's interest in the work was important validation at a critical time. Curators were beginning to show interest in graffiti art, and the studio provided the writers with the confidence they needed as they entered their new yard—the galleries.

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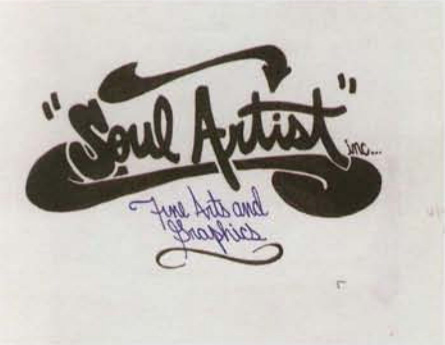
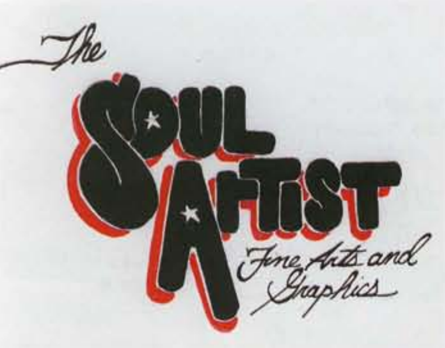
1. **Shy 147**
2. **Mousey 56**
3. **Rastar**
4. **Aeron**
5. **Kid 56**
6. **Pete**
7. **Dr. Pepper**
8. not known
9. **Futura**
10. **Nac**
11. **Crash**
12. **Eddie**
13. **Dondi**
14. **Duro**
15. **Zephyr**
16. **Daze**
17. **Noc 167**

VERCESI
HARDWARE

photos above: © Martha Cooper

AMERICAN





THE SOUL ARTISTS, 1981

At the time of Esses Studio, graffiti writers were already making some headway into the gallery world. Lee Quinones and Fab 5 Freddy had traveled to Italy in December 1979 to show their work at the Medusa Gallery in Rome. Closer to home, Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis opened an "anti-space" in the South Bronx in 1978 called Fashion Moda—their answer to the "boosh-wah" (bourgeois) Manhattan gallery system. The storefront on East 147th Street attracted the attention of neighborhood aerosol phenom CRASH, who began to curate his own exhibits there. His first show, "Graffiti Art Success for America," opened in October 1980 and included work by Futura, NOC, MITCH 77, and LEE. The show generated quite a buzz, including a glowing review by Elizabeth Hess in the *Village Voice*. Two months later, much of the work from the show appeared in a larger Manhattan exhibit at the New Museum on Fourteenth Street. The show received a good deal of press attention and helped expose the aerosol movement to new audiences.

Meanwhile, Dondi was spending a lot of time with some new friends in Manhattan called the Soul Artists. The Soul Artists, or "SA," were a group of writers who Dondi met at Esses Studio. The SA began in 1972 as a writing clique founded by ALI and Futura. After disbanding in the mid-seventies, some of the original members reunited in the late 1970s. Armed with a small urban-renewal contract from the city government and a handful of new recruits, the SA opened its art workshop on the Upper West Side in 1979.

The new incarnation of the group included a combination of veteran "retired" writers such as BAMA and STAN 153 and a number of active train painters as well. Newer recruits like QUIK and REVOLT kept things real on steel, while producing small canvases and other commercial work. Unfortunately, in 1979, a significant market for their work was yet to be cultivated—a reality that the Soul Artists were determined to change.

The walls of the Soul Artists headquarters at 106th Street and Columbus Avenue were adorned with small canvases painted by various members of the group. The same type of competitive spirit that pushed the quality of the work on the trains took hold in the workshop, and before long, writers were showing up with their latest creations, hoping to "burn" the competition.

ALI was constantly exploring all viable options for keeping the group afloat. At first the SA did a lot of small commissions, such as painting signs and murals. After a long day at the workshop, the SA boys loved to blow off steam at various Manhattan hot spots. They were regulars at clubs including Danceteria and the Peppermint Lounge, where they'd raid the room with their personal brand of networking and party-wrecking. Interestingly, even before the introduction of hip-hop to downtown clubs, many Manhattan clubs were extremely supportive of graffiti art. In addition to hosting a number of early exhibitions, many clubs commissioned graffiti work for a wide variety of applications.

The Soul Artists held meetings on Monday nights at their workshop. Over time, these small private meetings grew into enormous underground powwows. The gatherings began attracting an eclectic mix of painters, musicians, filmmakers, activists, and various outlaws. Journalists were thrilled that there was now a place they could go and meet the allegedly elusive graffiti writers. Many notorious downtowners showed up at the SA meetings; Glenn O'Brien, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Mudd Club co-founder Diego Cortez all stopped by.

Dondi at the Soul Artists studio
photo: © Martha Cooper
1981

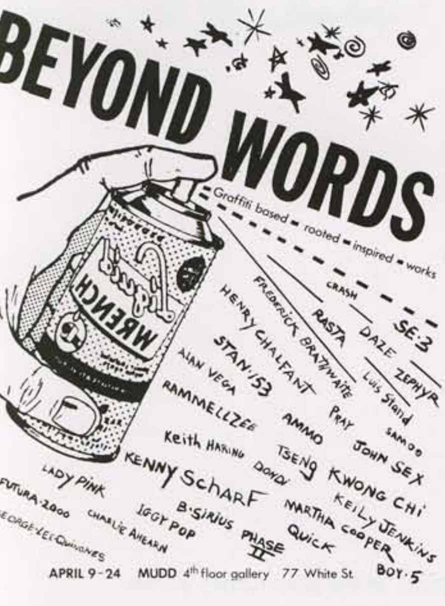
Dondi, Aeron, Zephyr, Futura, Haze, Ali, Fab 5 Freddy, Rammellzee at New York/New Wave
1981

"NEW YORK/NEW WAVE," FEBRUARY 1981

The Mudd Club was New York's most notorious downtown "anti-club," the motherhouse of the elite punk fraternity. Its creation was a backlash reaction to the Studio 54 disco scene that dominated New York nightlife in the late 1970s. Mudd Club cofounder Diego Cortez was about to curate a large exhibit in a huge new space in Queens called P.S. 1. The show, entitled "New York/New Wave," would be Dondi's first trip into the new yard.

"New York/New Wave" opened in February 1981. For it, Cortez assembled a group of artists who he felt offered a visual representation of the downtown/punk/new wave scene. Included were the works of thirteen graffiti writers, including Fab 5 Freddy, ALI, Futura, HAZE, ZEPHYR, LEE, SAMO (the graffiti alias of painter Jean-Michel Basquiat), LADY PINK, and Dondi. For his first serious exhibit, Dondi painted a huge figurative piece, void of any lettering or visual references to writing. The painting, rendered on sign-painter's tin, was a futuristic-looking warrior perched atop a flying reptile. It was cartoonish but perfectly rendered and done entirely with spray paint. The press's reaction to the show was mixed, as some conservative critics couldn't grapple with the show's punk aesthetic. However, many among the art cognoscenti loved the show and lauded the work as the birth of a new generation of painters (Basquiat was "discovered" there).

The works of the writers generated an overwhelmingly positive response. Their paintings were seen for the first time by many from New York's cultural elite who knew little or nothing about the writers and their work. For those among the subway painters hoping to establish themselves "aboveground," it was an enormous step in the right direction. For Dondi, it was just the beginning.


BEYOND WORDS
Graffiti based - rooted - inspired - works
WRENCH
CRASH
SE:3
RASTA
DAZE
ZEPHYR
FREDERICK BRATHWAITE
HENRY CHALFANT
Luis Stand
STAN:153
ALAN VEGA
PRAY
SAMOO
RAMMELLZEE
AMMO
JOHN SEX
Keith HARING
TSENG KWONG CHI
DONDI
KEILY JENKINS
KENNY SCHARF
MARTHA COOPER
LADY PINK
QUICK
FUTURA-2000
B.SIRIUS
IGGY POP
PHASE II
CHARLIE AHEARN
GEORGE-LEE-QUINONES
APRIL 9-24 MUDD 4th floor gallery 77 White St.
BOY.5

FUN GALLERY, 1982

After the overwhelming response to the P.S. 1 show, the Mudd Club handed its fourth floor over to Futura and Fab 5 Freddy to curate their own exhibit. In April 1981 "Beyond Words" opened. The poster for the show read "Graffiti Based, Rooted, Inspired Works" and listed the names of thirty artists—most of whom were graffiti writers. The lineup included NOC, DAZE, LADY PINK, Rammellzee, and a host of others. The show also featured photos of painted subways by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant and the work of a young art student turned street artist named Keith Haring. Haring was gaining notoriety for his street pictograms of little dog-

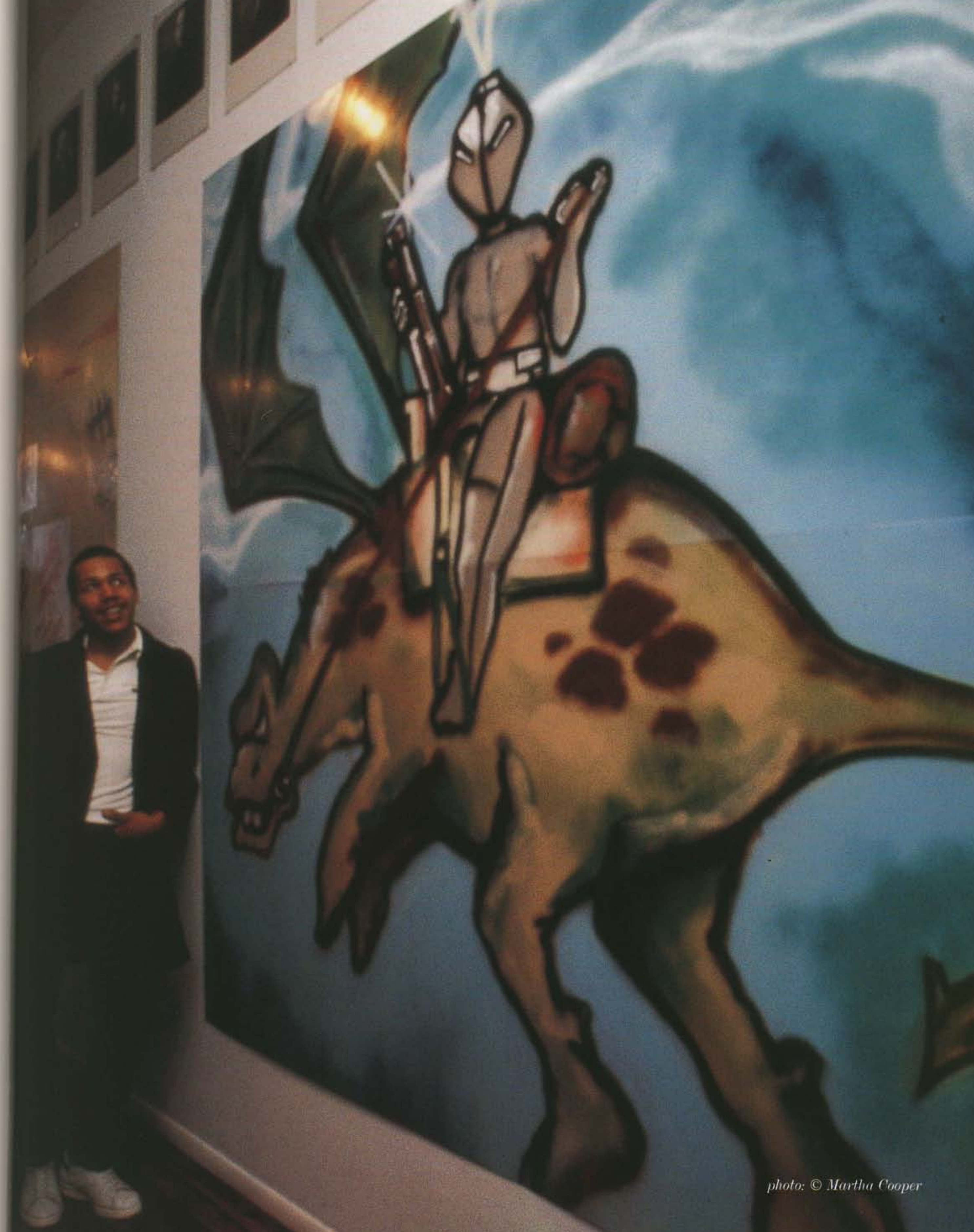
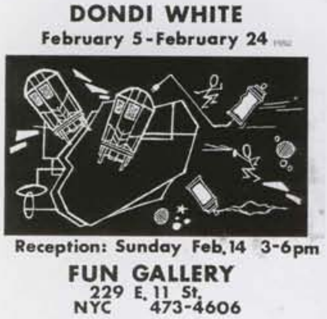


photo: © Martha Cooper



DONDI WHITE
February 5-February 24 1982

Reception: Sunday Feb.14 3-6pm

FUN GALLERY
229 E. 11 St.
NYC 473-4606

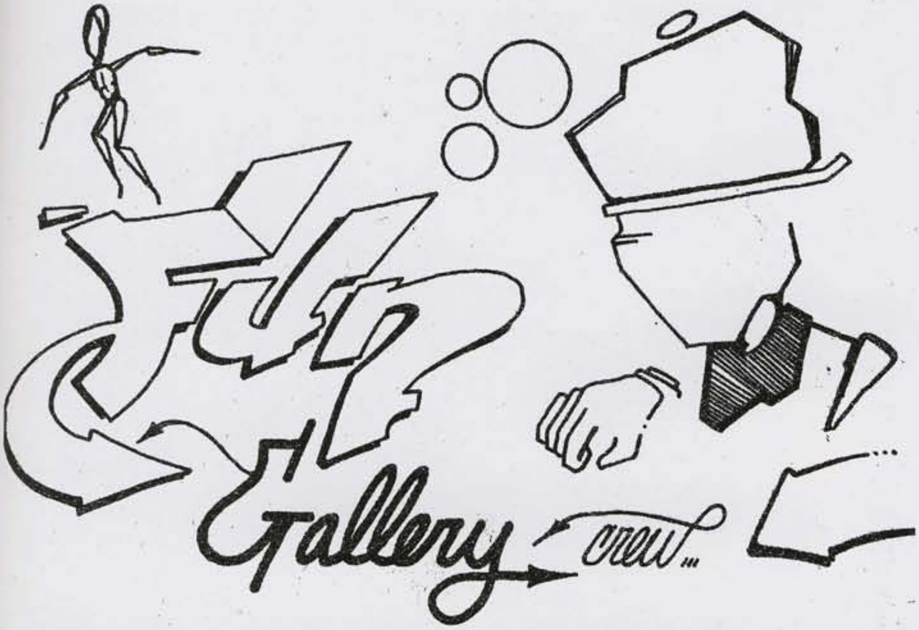
gies and babies. There were a few oddities in the lineup too, such as punk icon Iggy Pop. "Beyond Words" was Dondi's fourth exhibit.

Although "Beyond Words" was an underground show, it was without question a breakthrough event. The show represented a pivotal moment in the early days of the exciting new movement called hip-hop. When Fab 5 Freddy asked DJ Afrika Bambaataa to perform at the "Beyond Words" opening, it was the birth of an era. The convergence of personal style, creativity, and urban identity in visual art and music was nothing short of cultural alchemy. The Bronx's indigenous forms—rap, breakdancing, and scratching—instantly captivated the cool downtown kids. The new revolution needed a downtown home, and soon a club called Negril, and later the Roxy—with its "Wheels of Steel" Fridays—became Manhattan's site for the burgeoning movement. It was only a matter of months before the graffiti writers had a place they could call home, too.

The Fun Gallery began almost by accident. Its original location was a tiny storefront on East Eleventh Street. In 1981, Bill Stelling was running a roommate referral service where an actress named Patti Astor worked as a receptionist. The two joined forces and planned to put the storefront (also Stelling's textile showroom) to better use. Both were regulars on the lively downtown party circuit and decided the storefront would be a great place to throw fabulous parties. The phrase art opening had a good ring to it and provided just the right touch (it may even have been an afterthought to the party aspect). In August 1981, Astor's ex-husband, the artist Steven Kramer, started things off with the inaugural exhibit/cocktail bash at the yet to be named microgallery. It was decided that each artist would name the gallery for the duration of his show. The second show featured Kenny Scharf, who dubbed the place "Fun Gallery." The name was irreverent and it stuck—the Fun Gallery was christened.

The first few openings were fairly quiet, but with each passing show, attendance grew. Patti and Bill met a lot of the writers, and when Fab 5 Freddy showed his paintings there in December of 1981, things shifted into high gear. Freddy, a master of self-promotion, attracted big collectors, movers and shakers. As "the Fun" began to hit its stride, a wave of storefront galleries opened in the immediate vicinity, thus creating the East Village gallery scene of the early 1980s.

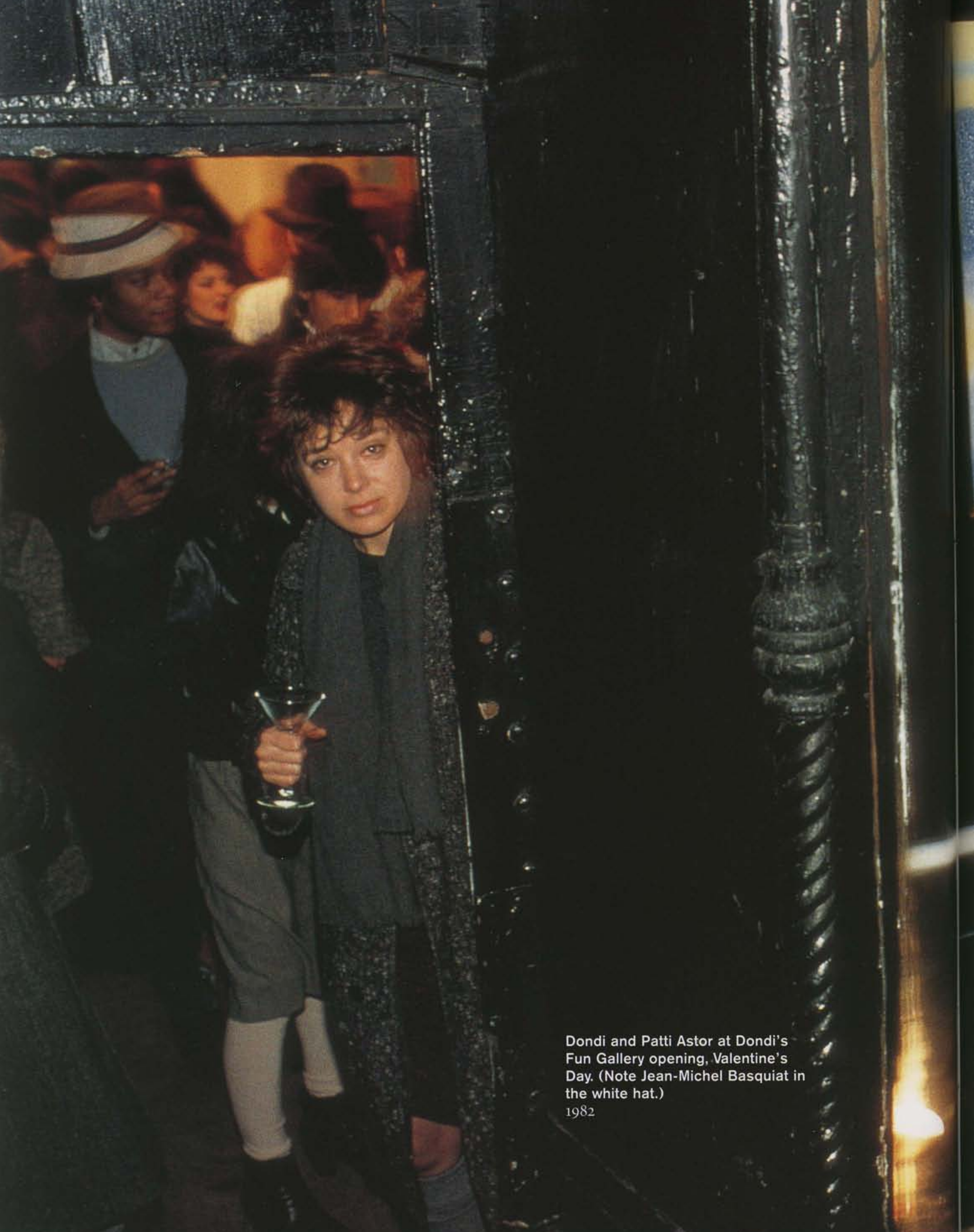
Meanwhile, Dondi toiled in his two Brooklyn studios—his basement and the New Lots train yard. He painted his best trains during this period as a barrage of new influences pushed him into creative overdrive. The basement was still the CIA supply center, but now it doubled as the painting



studio of that hot new painter on the Manhattan scene named Dondi White. In October 1981, Dondi began creating paintings for his first solo exhibition. In February 1982, Dondi's first one-man show opened at the Fun Gallery.

The evolution of his work in just two short years was astonishing. At Esses Studio he approached the canvas as he did a subway panel—his name was the main ingredient, and the figures were embellishment. In the new canvases he demonstrated the possibilities of his unconventional medium, spray paint. The seven paintings featured a vocabulary of conspicuous icons: floating spray cans, STAYHIGH 149's stealthy stick figure, silhouettes of trains, and the letter "D." The work was sophisticated, cool, and calculated—and immediately shattered any preconceived notions of graffiti artists as unskilled vandals. His technique with the spray can was mystifying. Miniscule details, rendered freehand with aerosol paint, surprised even the most talented writers of the day.

The opening reception for the show was on a Sunday night, Valentine's Day. Dondi arrived in blue jeans and a denim jacket. He sported a light-blue Brooks Brothers shirt with a thin leather tie. He was twenty years old, tall, and handsome, with a crooked boyish grin. He was a well-tuned combination of self-consciousness and self-assurance, and everyone loved him. He was young, talented . . . and well on his way.



Dondi and Patti Astor at Dondi's Fun Gallery opening, Valentine's Day. (Note Jean-Michel Basquiat in the white hat.)
1982

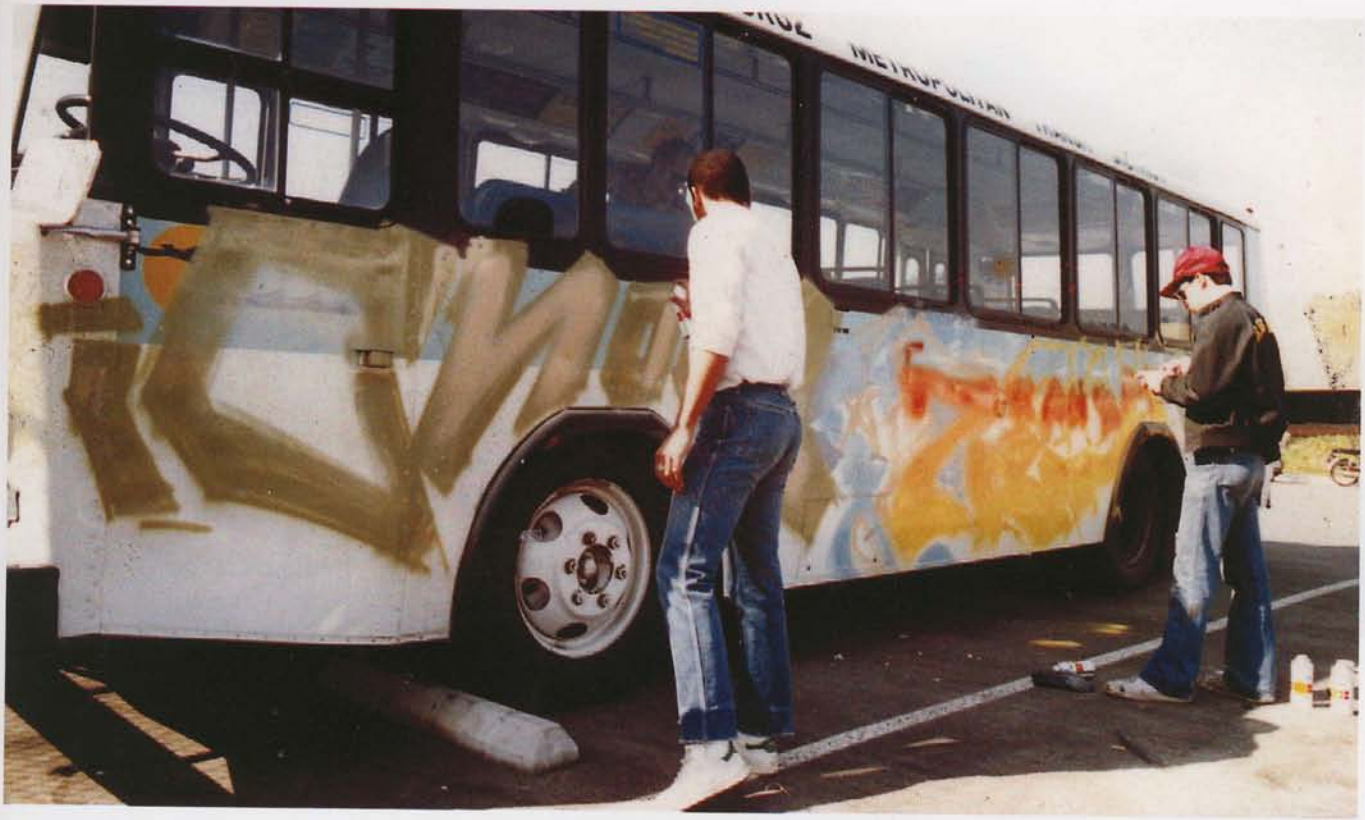
photo: © Martha Cooper

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA, 1982

In February 1982, twenty-five of the canvases from Esses Studio and thirty photographs by Henry Chalfant were exhibited at the University Gallery of UCSC—the University of California at Santa Cruz. At the expense of the college, Dondi, ZEPHYR, and Futura all flew out to hang out at the show and appear at the opening (it was Dondi's first trip on a plane).

The students loved the work—most of them had never seen anything like it. The writers found the response refreshing. Back home they were used to a tiring dichotomy: half the time they were artists with an appreciative audience, half the time they were criminals, wanted for acts of vandalism. Back home in New York it was easy to be a little nervous—they never knew where the next attack might come from. The reception in California was pure and real, so much so that the college asked them to spontaneously spray the exterior of the gallery. The three gladly obliged and the "live" mural painting caused a minor stir on campus and was covered by a local paper. The head of the MTD, Santa Cruz's transit authority, read about their visit and offered them a bus to paint.

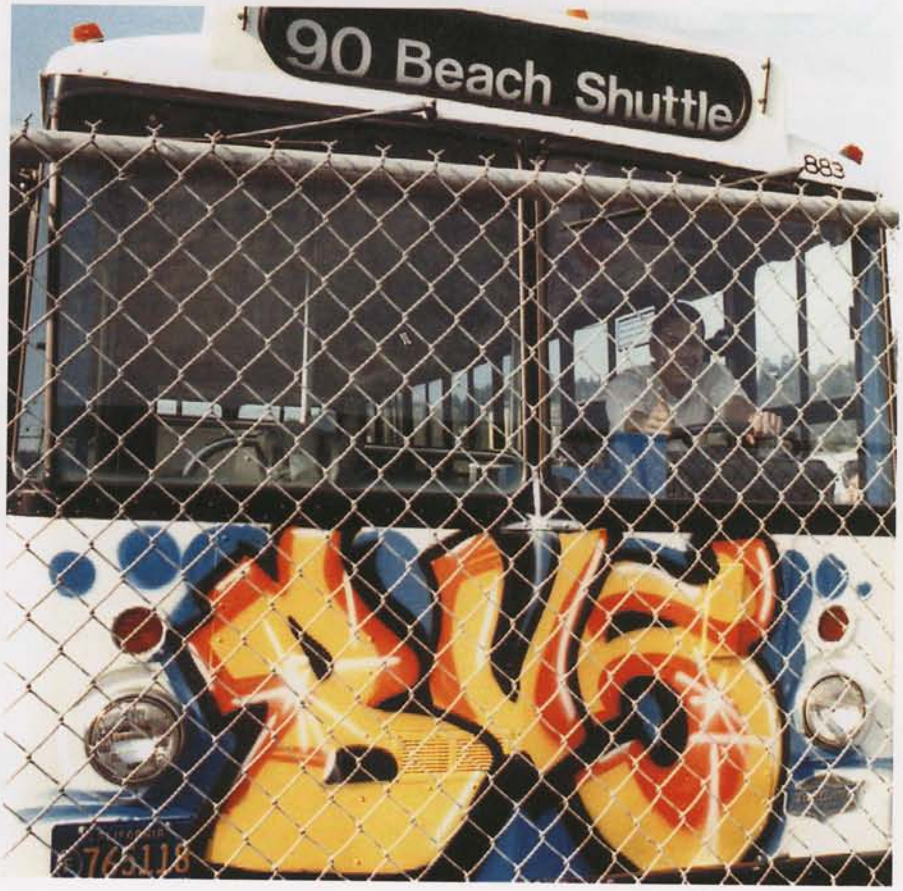
ART AS WE KNOW
CARMEN
1982
NEW


METROPOLITAN

Above:
Painting the bus, courtesy of the Santa Cruz Transit Authority
1982

Right:
BUS 129 in BUS
1982

Left:
Zephyr, Futura & Dondi
1982


90 Beach Shuttle
883
BUS

Opposite & above:
The I Club, Hong Kong
1982

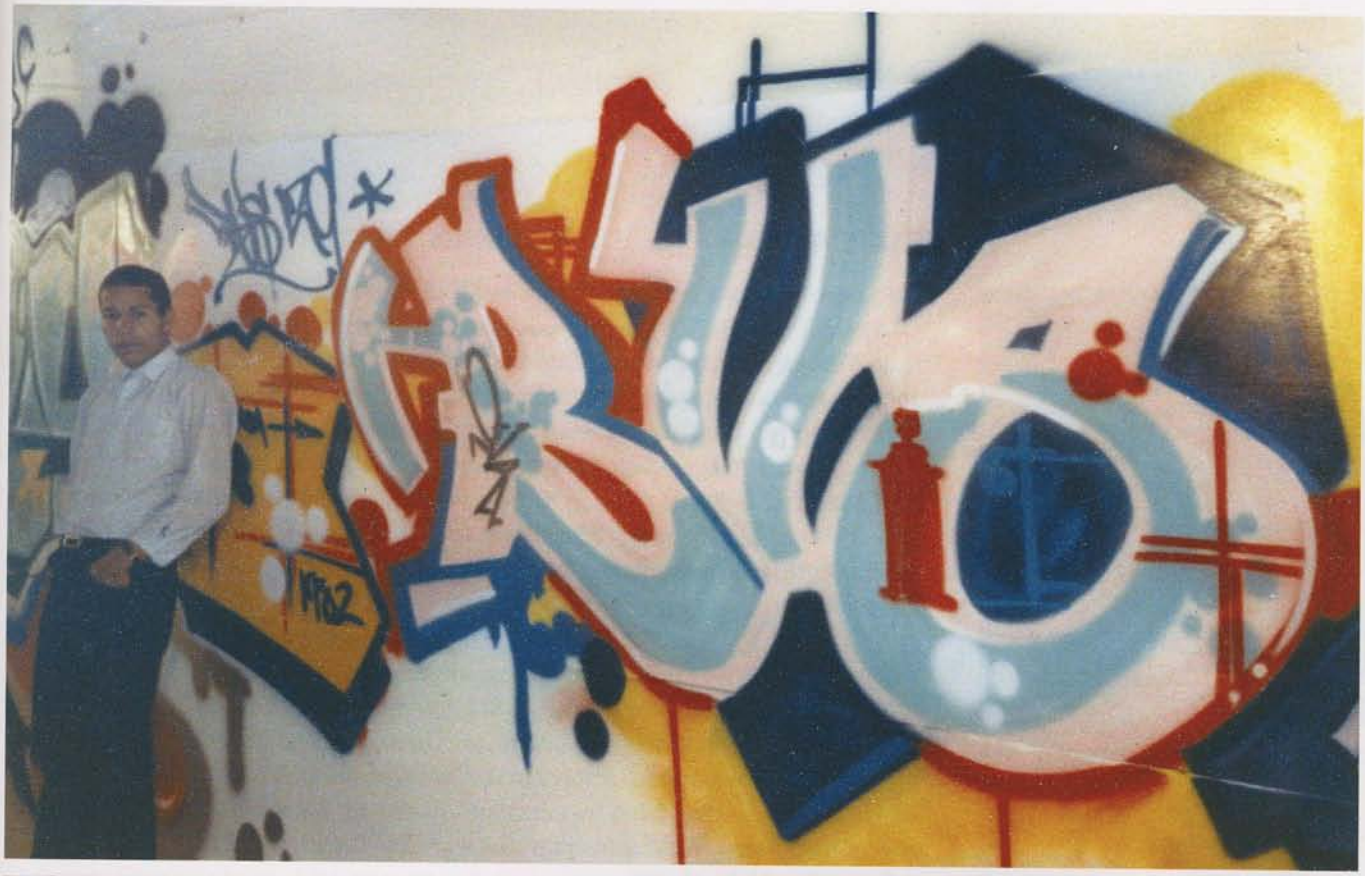
HONG KONG, MAY 1982

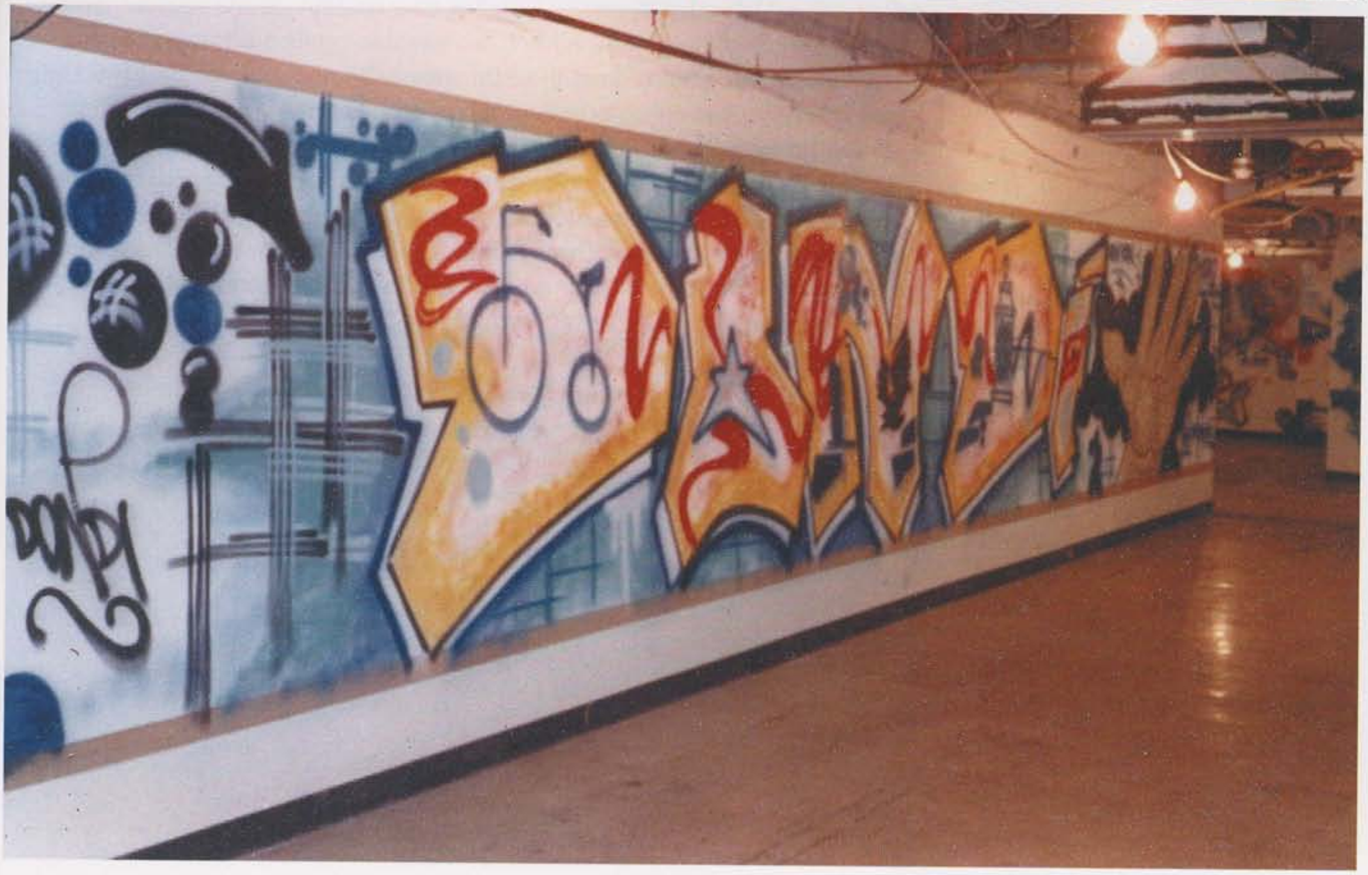
Three months later the group was bound for Hong Kong. The trip was arranged by Jeffery Deitch, a critic and art buyer for Citibank. A large exclusive club called the I Club was being built in Hong Kong, and halfway through the construction, the owners decided to throw a huge on-site party for their investors. Concerned about the visual condition of the site, the owners contacted Deitch inquiring after artists who could paint an enormous amount of space beautifully, quickly, and affordably. Deitch immediately thought of the graffiti artists. Less than one week later, following a mad scramble for a passport, Dondi, ZEPHYR, and Futura were on their way to Hong Kong.

Futura, a U.S. Navy veteran, had spent time in Hong Kong and was thrilled to return under considerably different circumstances. A large limousine picked them up upon their arrival and the trip was uphill from there. After settling into a lavish hotel, the boys went to see the club. What they found was nothing short of a graffiti writer's fantasy—ten thousand square feet of white walls, just waiting to be "bombed." A few of the walls had a top layer of canvas attached to them like wallpaper so that their hosts could preserve some of their work.

In the rush to organize the paint-a-thon, one important ingredient was overlooked—paint. As it turned out, spray paint was scarce in Hong Kong. A flurry of panicked phone calls produced no results but one lead: automobile touch-up paint. Apparently Hong Kong, a major hub for automobile export, had a big demand for high quality after-market paint.

After a surreal search (via limousine) through Hong Kong's back streets, the three struck gold—a supplier of aerosol auto touch-up paint. It came in the most dizzying array of colors. With three hundred cans at their disposal, they went to work. They spent three straight days engulfed in fumes, and when they emerged, there wasn't a foot of blank space left. The three artists put another notch on their list of "firsts" and memorable stamps in their passports.

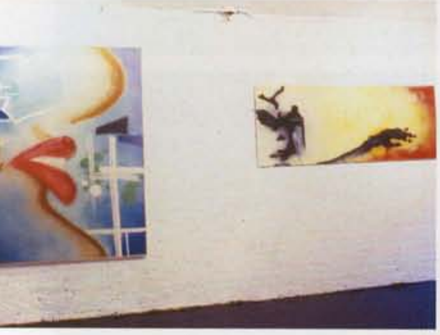



DONDI

51X GALLERY, "THE UGLY MAN," 1982

51X GALLERY

Rich Colicchio in front of 51X
1982



"The Ugly Man" show
1982

Two blocks south of the Fun was the 51X gallery. Founded by Rich Colicchio in 1981, the gallery was centrally located on St. Marks Place, the East Village's main drag. Colicchio was a working-class kid from New Jersey who came to the city to attend the School of Visual Arts and wound up owning his own gallery. Like Astor and Stelling, Colicchio admired the work of the subway artists and showed them frequently. In March 1982, 51X featured Dondi's work in a group show, which also included Futura, Fab 5 Freddy, and the sculptor Keily Jenkins. Dondi did his first one-man exhibit there in September 1982. He called the show "The Ugly Man." The press release, written by Dondi himself, read:

> Paintings done by Dondi White in a one-man exhibition at the place to be. On view will be works produced in the early months of this year. All paintings done in traditional spray paint techniques, as he often exercised on the IRT subways in the mid-seventies to the later part of 1980. Always wanting to return to the yards in mind and plenty of energy in hand, these works have been created for you and yours to conceive. This show will be called "The Ugly Man."

Whereas the paintings at the Fun were tight and precise, in "The Ugly Man" Dondi loosened up considerably. The paintings were atmospheric and abstract. Three of the paintings were done on long, narrow pieces of plywood. Broad washes of color covered the entire surface, bringing out the natural elegance of the wood's grain. Intimidating figures lurked in the corners. In his new works, Dondi abandoned his traditional icons to focus on the overall mood and feeling of the piece. It appeared he was completely comfortable with his technique, and the painting process had become quite natural for him. Now he could turn his attention to plunging into the depths of his own psyche. The approach brought forth beautiful, subtle, and surprisingly personal results.

WILD STYLE, THE MOVIE, 1982

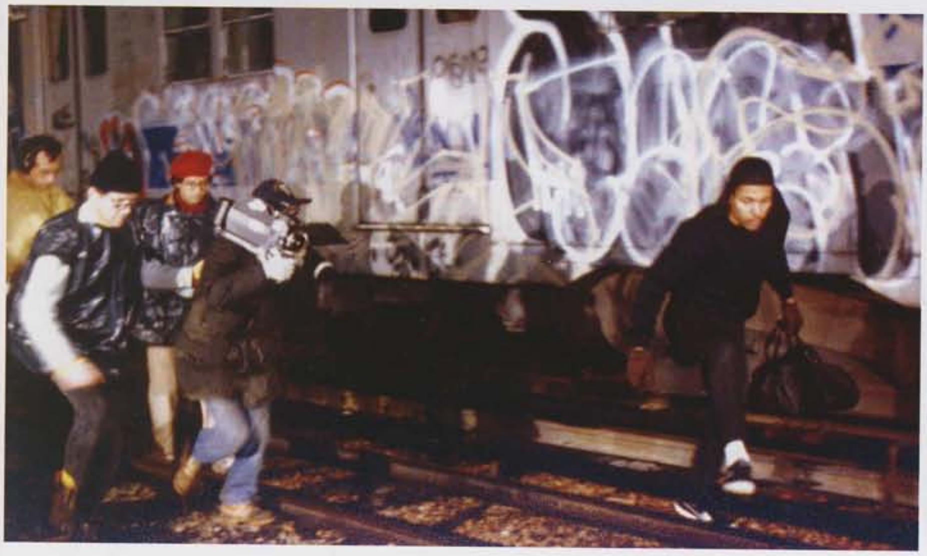
In late 1980, independent filmmaker Charlie Ahearn and Fab 5 Freddy began work on a film about the hip-hop culture. *Wild Style* is the fictional story of Zoro, a mysterious phantom graffiti artist, who dazzles everyone with his amazing work. No one suspects that Zoro is actually mild-mannered Raymond, who the local writers dismiss as a "toy."
Although the writer Lee Quinones played the role of Zoro, Dondi had also been considered for it.

The film was cast entirely with real players from the early days of hip-hop. The final result is both a humorous narrative and a dizzying showcase of talent. The early footage of hip-hop pioneers Grandmaster Flash and the Rock Steady Crew alone make the film classic.

In the early stage of the film's development, Ahearn spent time with Dondi, soaking up a feel for the writing culture. He even went so far as to accompany Dondi, ZEPHYR, and AERON to the yards in 1981 to experience "the art of the mission" firsthand and to do some subway painting himself. (The result was HEROIN KILLS. See p. 72–73.)

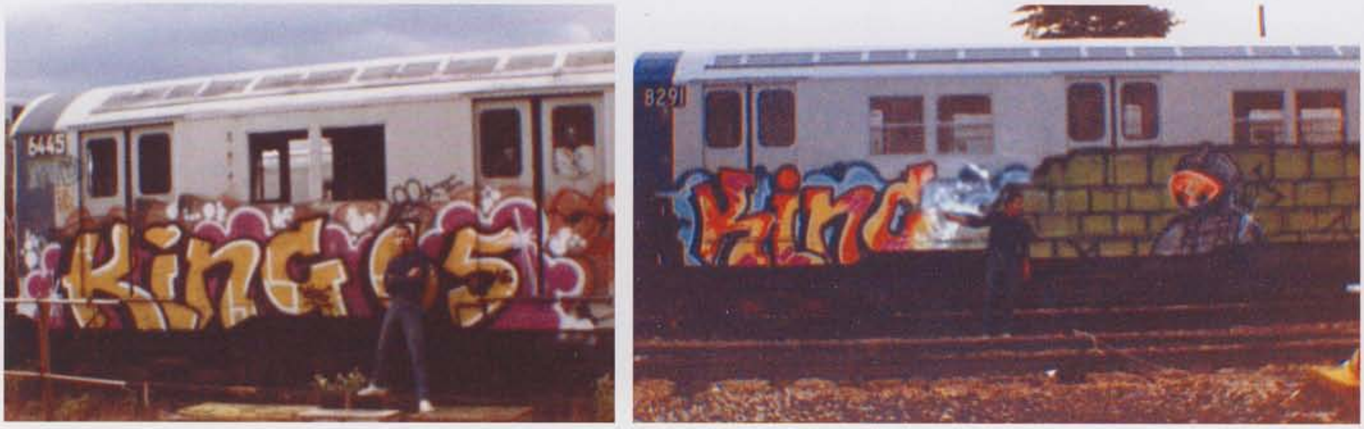
The train-yard scenes in *Wild Style* were shot in the M-train Yard in Queens. For the shoot, Ahearn was granted usage of the yard and permission to spray on one broken subway car. When LEE declined to be filmed inside the yard, Ahearn hired Dondi to double for him. Shrouded in a do-rag, he was filmed entering the yard, hitting one of the trains parked there, and getting chased by two detectives (one of whom was played by graffiti legend IZ THE WIZ). Later, a realistic prop train was constructed in a soundstage and Dondi, again doubling as Zoro, executed a Zoro portrait. On his own, Dondi created the WILD STYLE whole-car. His amazing car appeared in the film, and set the aesthetic tempo for the entire production.

Dondi and Charlie Ahearn
1982



Dondi on the set of *Wild Style*
photo: © Martha Cooper
1982

photo: © Martha Cooper



On the set of *Dreams Don't Die* in the M Yard
1982

DREAMS DON'T DIE, 1982

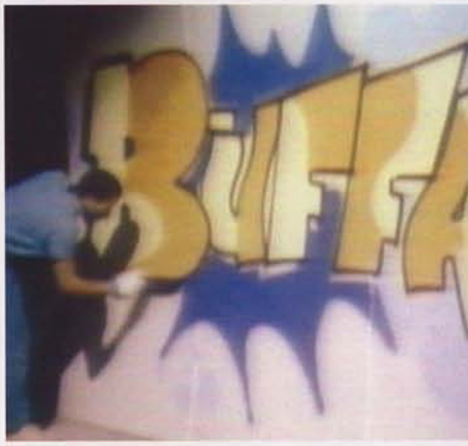
Wild Style was not the only film Dondi worked on. *Dreams Don't Die* was an American-made TV movie which originally aired on May 21, 1982, and told the fictional story of a graffiti artist named KING 65. KING was played by Ike Eisenmann, from Disney's *Escape to Witch Mountain*. Eisenmann—slight, wide-eyed, and very white—looked notably out of place in the role. The story is a convoluted tale of KING's battle with tough urban realities and personal pressures. In the course of the film we are introduced to the fatherly beat cop, the whiny love interest, and an implausibly adolescent drug lord. The film's take on graffiti was disturbing. KING is portrayed as a kid with a monkey on his back, unable to kick his evil habit. Ultimately he's redeemed—but only after he gives up his graffiti writing for "a real job."

The Hollywood production lacked the gritty verité of *Wild Style,* but *Dreams* wasn't a complete washout. Productions of its stature usually rely on set decorators to "replicate" graffiti. Much to their credit, the *Dreams* producers had the integrity to hire an authentic graffiti artist, and Dondi was brought in as consultant and artist. His most significant contribution to the production was an elaborate KING piece on a train, complete with a large glowing sun, a spaceman, and a giant outstretched hand.

The car was painted in the M Yard in Queens, the same yard where portions of *Wild Style* were filmed. For *Dreams,* Dondi was escorted into the yard and given a "clean car" to work on (the car was freshly painted by the Metropolitan Transit Authority specifically for him). He was asked to restrict his painting to that one car, but later in the day he was able to slip away and do two other KING pieces elsewhere in the yard. Not long after the making of *Dreams* and *Wild Style,* the Transit Authority implemented policy changes and eliminated this type of usage of trains and other MTA properties. Before long, even trains with preexisting graffiti became off limits to films, videos, and photo shoots seeking the "reality look" graffitied trains offered.

"BUFFALO GALS," WINTER 1982

For many people around the planet, first contact with hip-hop music, break dancing, and graffiti came via a music video for a punchy hit called "Buffalo Gals." The tune and video were the creation of cultural impresario Malcolm McClaren. McClaren is best known as the British Svengali who unleashed the Sex Pistols on the world in the 1970s. He was introduced to rapping and scratching while on a visit to New York in 1982. The record, which successfully captured the energy and sounds emanating from the Bronx, was a huge hit. The video was produced by Ruza Blue, a hip-hop promoter and former associate of McClaren's. It featured the Rock Steady Crew (who she managed) and a group of DJs and emcees called the World Famous Supreme Team. Blue approached Dondi to work on the video. In it he appears painting a "Buffalo Gals" piece on a handball court in "Rock Steady Park" in upper Manhattan. The video appeared on MTV and quickly made its way around the globe. Thousands of graffiti writers, particularly in Europe, respectfully acknowledge the "Buffalo Gals" video as their first contact with graffiti art.



Still from "Buffalo Gals"
1982

THE NEW YORK CITY RAP TOUR, NOVEMBER 1982

The New York City Rap Tour was organized as a promotional tour for the French record label Celluloid. Jean Karakos, Celluloid's owner, fused rapping and writing when he released individual twelve-inch singles by PHASE 2, Fab 5 Freddy, and Futura in 1982. In November, a large group assembled by Ruza Blue traveled to France and England to share the hip-hop vapors with the neighbors "across the pond." The two-week tour included DJ Afrika Bambaataa, Rammellzee, the Rock Steady Crew, Grandmixer D.ST, the Double Dutch Girls, PHASE 2, Fab 5 Freddy, Futura, and Dondi.

Dondi and Ruza Blue
1982

It was Dondi's first trip to Europe—and it was wild from start to finish. As to who suffered more culture shock, the performers or the audience, the jury is still out. But this much is certain—the group made its presence felt. From the moment they set foot in Europe, the posse caused quite a stir. Legend has it that when the tour bus came to pick them up at Orly Airport, the writers in the entourage immediately "bombed" it with tags, much to the driver's distress.

The tour performances gave everyone an opportunity to flex their skills. Rock Steady did their break dancing while Bambaataa and D.ST rocked the turntables. Rammellzee, PHASE, and Fab rocked the mics while the

Double Dutch Girls entertained with their dynamic brand of jumping rope. Meanwhile, Dondi and Futura painted "live" backdrops as the action swirled around them. In London, Dondi was approached by an audience member who asked to purchase his freshly painted backdrop. Dondi quickly obliged. The tour's cross-cultural exchange was an enormous success. Europe welcomed the hip-hop world into theirs with open arms.

YAKI KORNBLIT GALLERY, JANUARY 1983

Kornblit Gallery
1983

Dondi rejected most of the commercial work he was offered. Working on *Dreams* and *Wild Style* was rewarding, but Dondi needed the freedom of painting. In January 1983, Dondi made his European gallery debut—a one-man show at the Yaki Kornblit Gallery in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Kornblit, an Israeli native living in Holland, discovered graffiti shortly after the "New York/New Wave" show. Niva Kislac, a New York collector and old friend, was enthused by the graffiti work at P.S. 1 and told Kornblit about it. Kornblit had been representing artists for decades and was known for his involvement with Robert Rauschenberg, among other notables. In the late 1970s, Kornblit closed his gallery because "there was nothing to show." In the early 1980s he became interested in painters like Sandro Chia, Rainer Fetting, and Herve DeRosa and considered reviving the gallery. However, it wasn't until Kornblit saw the work of the graffiti writers that he actually reopened his doors.

The Fun was the first gallery in New York to give writers one-man shows, and Kornblit's gallery was the first in Europe. The Fun's charm was partly its lack of pretensions—it remained a little rough around the edges throughout its four-year run. Kornblit had the means and experience to present the artists with a bit more finesse. His commitment and belief in the commercial potential of the work was evident when he signed up ten New York aerosol artists for upcoming shows.

Dondi was the first to show at the newly reopened gallery. With the new work it was obvious that Dondi had found his rhythm. Not only was he turning out large pieces at a steady rate, the great fun he was having showed through. The paintings for his European debut were confident and polished. By now he had assembled a visual vocabulary which he dispensed effortlessly. The silhouettes, trains, and skulls—the staples of his language—were starting to interact with each other. He began incorporating text in his work and concocting intriguing titles like *Dark Continent of Kings, Tom Sawyer,* and *3 Energy Release*.

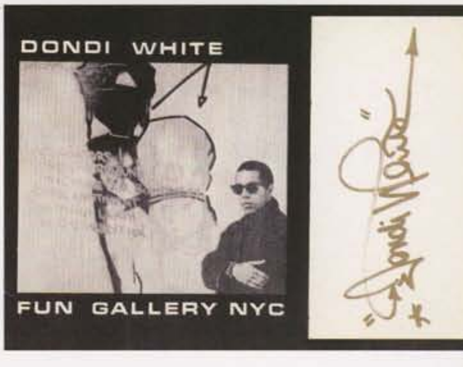
The reception to the show exceeded Dondi and Kornblit's greatest expectations. First, Kornblit's loyal collector base vied for the strongest pieces and immediately snatched them up. Then the local kids came around, peering through the windows before summoning up the courage to enter the gallery. Dondi befriended a number of them, some of whom went on to become the founders of Holland's own graffiti movement.

Dondi had found his new home. In the States he sold work, but in Holland his shows sold out. The resounding reception to the new phenomenon of "Graffiti Art" was extraordinary. In Europe, Dondi (in Holland) and Futura (in France) firmly established themselves as the leaders of the new movement. With each show, Dondi continued to flourish and surpass himself on the new frontier.

FUN GALLERY (ROUND TWO), MARCH 1983

Dondi worked nonstop in 1983, by far his busiest year. After the Kornblit exhibit he was invited to show at a prestigious gallery in Düsseldorf, Germany, called "Art in Progress." Somehow he found time between his show in Holland (January) and his German debut (April) to mount his second exhibit back home at the Fun Gallery in March. In 1983 his work was also featured in group shows at galleries in Belgium, New York, and Switzerland. In October, Dondi accompanied a large entourage to Japan to promote the opening of *Wild Style* there. Also in October, a number of his paintings were featured in a major museum show in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

"Dondi White"
Fun Gallery
1983...


DONDI WHITE
FUN GALLERY NYC

His second show at the Fun was a homecoming for the world traveler. He had clearly won over the Dutch, but the challenge the American collectors presented still remained. While his openings at the Fun and 51X elicited the frenzy of a rock show, sales remained relatively quiet compared to the response abroad.

For his second show at the Fun, Dondi assembled a range of works from the past two years. The canvases were very large and some were hung directly on the wall, without stretchers. The new work was more atmospheric and he was allowing more white canvas to show through. In one piece, he returned to the use of his name as the centerpiece, as if to let everyone know he had come home. In fact he had: Dondi still lived with his mother and father, but as he was traveling all the time, they saw less of him. Amazingly, on top of everything else, he still found time to make nighttime forays to the yards.

MUSEUM BOYMANS-VAN BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM, OCTOBER 1983

The social implications of graffiti struck a resounding chord with the Europeans. Its "newness," its lack of perceptible predecessors, made it irresistible to the traditionalists. They showed their enthusiasm for the new art by granting it, overnight, "museumworthiness." While graffiti writers struggled to find a financial foothold in the United States, in Europe their paintings went straight to venerable institutions like the Boymans–van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

It's naive to think that the devout interest in graffiti was untouched by insider politics. European dealers who wielded enormous influence exercised their power to forward their new graffiti agendas. The writers didn't mind, but some may have looked at the speed of the adoption process with some suspicion.

Dondi wanted nothing more than to mingle and work the galleries and the museums. He was completely at peace in the white-walled world. He tracked his own course and continued to lead the new movement. This affection for the "serious" art world was not shared by all. A number of his peers squirmed and strained to find their comfort zones. For some of the writers, the "natural" canvas progression was anything but. In some cases, the "inspiration" to paint was thrust upon them by exploitative hucksters who smelled a payday.

The Boymans show opened on October 22, 1983. It featured BLADE, CRASH, Dondi, Futura, LEE, NOC, QUIK, Rammellzee, SEEN, and ZEPHYR. For the artists involved, the exhibit was glorious. Those who had dismissed the writers as novelty acts were forced to reevaluate their opinions. In conjunction with the show, a sharp sixty-five-page catalog was produced. In it, Dondi spoke clearly about his work and his transition from trains to canvas. New York–based art critic Edit Deak, who had been on the graffiti beat for years, conducted the interview:

You were saying that the politics of the art world seems to parallel the battle underground.

Yes, it's like getting up in this new yard, the gallery. You have to gain respect and develop your style to a certain point, have a consistent style. The battle aboveground is getting established in this new yard, the art world. It's similar but slowed down for this new audience. This work in the gallery is not in the subway, not whizzing by, it's easier for them to conceive it. It's always thrown in our faces that it is graffiti, but it's not, it is not done on public property, it is on canvas we have bought. The style is also controlled now, it's not as wild as on the train. We have plenty of time to do it in our workspace. We're not being chased or anything. The style is somewhat more personalized than what we're doing underground.

I'd like to know why you use the term "battle."
Underground you're competing with other graffiti writers, but aboveground everybody is searching for a style on canvas. It's like beating the other guy to the punch, since there is just so much you can do with spray paint.

Could you make some general statements about the battle underground?
It was style wars. It was all about style, creativity—what you developed in your own mind as opposed to aboveground in the art world where they expect you to be influenced by established artists. They expect us to take root sooner or later, but we're not, as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to continue the same traditional roots from subway-painting culture.

You have been experimenting with direct handprint with spray paint. Is this because of the limitation of spray paint?
No, the issue is the ignorance of the public limiting the artist, not the materials. These new gallery-goers are ignorant of the evolution of our work. We have to bring people to it gradually. I feel like we have to start all over. That is what I mean by getting up in this new yard. If I just went on to canvas doing full-fledged pieces, people wouldn't understand how a lot of this came about. I am starting over with the simpler stuff—letters without outlines, pieces with simple designs, and the use of the stick character. The stick character simulates us when, in our earlier "innocent" days, we played in the yards, having fun, being creative. What I'm doing now is a reflection on that era for a different audience. Some graffiti artists are doing pieces just like they would do on subway cars and they're not providing this new audience with the information of what led up to their work. They don't express the evolution, and that's what I'm trying to let them see. If we do not educate to its meaning, they will just treat it as a fad. If you want to own a piece of art, I guess you should know the motives behind it.

Does the task of educating people detract from developing your personal style?
No, because it's done through the paintings themselves. That's why I do the stick men, for example. To show basic concepts on how I felt when we were first painting the trains. We self-graduated ourselves to painting on canvas.

What was the breaking point? Was it getting too old?
You develop your ideas and techniques to a point where you would put it on something you could keep; more protected and private than on a subway.

What is the contribution or statement of this subway-painting culture to other artists and culture at large?
One can be creative without being institutionally guided. It's having quality creativity without control.

THE EUROPEAN MUSEUM SHOWS, 1983–1985

Dondi at the Groninger Museum

The Boymans–van Beuningen exhibit stayed up until December 1983, and from there it traveled to the Dutch city of Groningen and the Groninger Museum, where it opened in January 1984. The show caused a sensation everywhere it went, and young people likely to avoid museums flocked to the venerable institutions. Back in New York, where graffiti removal was a multimillion-dollar business, the mere mention of the "G" word elicited a backlash. In Europe, the work was free of preconceived notions and negative baggage—it was judged without prejudice. The work was still controversial, but the Europeans empathized with the plight of the writers. Of course, even as they embraced the work, they debated its merits, and to this day graffiti art inspires passionate debate in Europe.

The eleven paintings by Dondi included in the show were his best canvases to date and arguably among his best paintings ever. Many collectors refer to *Anno Domini, Modern Prophets,* and *Dear . . . Yours Truly* (all featured in the exhibit) as among his most important works. Following the Groninger show, the collection was shown at the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, Denmark, in September 1984. From there, the show returned to Holland, opening at the Gemeente Museum in Helmond in February 1985.

The museum shows were certainly good for Dondi's career, as well as Kornblit's. As the canvases traveled, they further solidified Dondi's status as an important modern artist. Not surprisingly, Dondi's second show at the Kornblit Gallery in May 1984 was a resounding success. The show featured a number of atmospheric pieces with broad, white, natural backgrounds. The canvases were presented unstretched and pinned directly to the wall, adding to a feeling of spontaneity.

But surprisingly, the 1984 Kornblit show would be Dondi's last one-man exhibit abroad. Perhaps it was too much too fast, perhaps he simply ran out of steam. But at the height of his success, Dondi walked away.

Without prior warning he gave up the galleries, the collectors, and the dealers.

Certainly tastes were changing, but the accusation that the galleries turned their backs on the writers is suspect. Such a broad statement denies the complex and fragile dynamics that catalyzed the writers' emergence in the first place. Clearly, a number of writers, such as LEE, CRASH, and Futura (and certainly Dondi) had emerged as visionaries whose affiliation with writing was collateral to their considerable expressions. Dondi's choice to withdraw was personal. Years later he spoke about his career and the choices he made, and he undoubtedly would have spoken more on the subject had he not become increasingly reclusive. Of course, Dondi did keep working, but he drastically reassessed his entire approach to producing art. Just as his priorities changed as he developed new opportunities for himself "aboveground," he revamped his priorities once again. Now, all it seemed Dondi wanted was a simpler, more "normal" life. He was sick and tired of the pressure to produce.

THE "ART TRAIN," PORT HURON, MICHIGAN, 1986

Throughout the second half of the 1980s, Dondi's work continued to be enthusiastically traded in Europe. By 1985, Kornblit was beginning to pursue other business interests, but there were a number of individuals poised to take his place. Henk Pijnenburg, a client of Kornblit's from Deurne, the Netherlands, made the gradual shift from collector to dealer. After Kornblit's retirement from the art world in 1986, Pijnenburg began to curate shows and continued to represent writers' works in Europe.

Back home in 1986, Dondi participated in a project called the "Art Train." For this innovative project, five commuter train cars were gutted and refurbished as self-contained rolling galleries. Inside the cars, paintings and educational material were exhibited. The "Art Train" traveled the country by rail, bringing the work directly to school kids living in smaller towns—some of which did not have major museums nearby.

In a bold move, the organizers of the innovative project invited twelve of New York's best-known writers to a train yard in Port Huron, Michigan, to paint the train's exteriors. Although it was a very original concept, America was clearly still having trouble accepting the writers as fine artists. The "outlaw painters of the night" label was beginning to wear thin—particularly for those who had solidly established themselves professionally.

Nevertheless, the opportunity to paint trains legally after years spent doing it illicitly was too much to pass up. The irony of the situation wasn't

Dondi and Koor arrive in Detroit
photo: Henry Chalfant
1986

lost on the writers. Most were already in their mid-twenties or older and were already retired from subway painting. Some saw the project as a reunion, for some it was a last hurrah. But as the movement came full circle on the icy banks of the Great Lakes, everyone accepted the "Art Train" project as a momentous occasion.

Famed graffiti photographer Henry Chalfant recruited the talent. The list of artists included KEL, Futura, DELTA 2, LEE, KOOR, DUSTER, ZEPHYR, VULCAN, PHASE 2, BLAST, MARE, and Dondi. For the project, Dondi rendered a piece similar to his 1980 whole-car *Children of the Grave, Part 2*—complete with the familiar Dondi icon, an enigmatic outstretched hand.

56 BLEECKER GALLERY, NEW YORK, 1987

Although the frenzy was over, in 1987 there was still considerable interest in Dondi's work, both domestically and abroad. For three years, since returning from his last show in Holland, Dondi strove to create a more conventional life for himself. He was living with a girlfriend in a SoHo loft and had taken a part-time job selling Italian menswear at a friend's posh Tribeca shop. He continued making drawings and paintings, but at his own pace. Dondi opened his final one-man exhibition, "Matter of Facts—New Drawings by Dondi White," at the 56 Bleecker Gallery on April 25, 1987.

The new gallery, situated on the border between SoHo and the East Village, was a perfect location for his final show. All of Dondi's friends and fans came out to support his "comeback," unaware that it was a farewell. The show was successful, but the mood in the community had changed. The party atmosphere was over, replaced by a palpable chill. The AIDS virus was claiming the lives of many of the art world's top names and ravaging the downtown artists' coterie.

DIFFA FUND-RAISER, PONTIAC, MICHIGAN, MARCH 1992

In March 1992, Dondi returned to Michigan for another event. "Education '92" was an event produced by DIFFA, the Design Industries Foundation for AIDS. To raise money for the foundation, paintings by seven of the leading painters from the graffiti movement were auctioned off to the public. For the auction, Dondi created what is perhaps his most personal painting. The enormous piece, nearly six-by-ten feet, featured a large, yellow geometric background spelling out the letters "A.D." The painting's title, *5 Sons of Lucia,* was printed across the top of the canvas in Red Devil

Wintergreen. The painting was a tribute to his mother, who died in 1989. It featured five silhouettes in the foreground—the five sons of Lucy White.

THE REMPIRE SHOW, NEW YORK, 1992

In 1992, Bill Stelling was running a large gallery in SoHo called the Rempire Gallery. Stelling showed his continued loyalty to the "underground" movement when he featured the "Legacy" exhibit there in May 1992. The show featured new works by LEE, Futura, ZEPHYR, STASH, CRASH, DAZE, and Dondi—the same seven who had participated in the DIFFA fund-raiser. At a time when New York dealers were attempting to relegate the writers to the nostalgia file, Stelling showed his continued commitment to the artists whose careers he had helped establish.

Conceptually, it appeared the artists had spent the last six years, since the closing of Fun, "finding" themselves. Cars, subway maps, and motorcycles provided primary source material and the individual vision of each writer was never more distinct.

In his paintings for the "Legacy" show, Dondi took on the demanding task of translating his detailed illustrations to canvas. His risky new paintings borrowed liberally from the gothic details of U.S. currency. He used solid background colors and obsessive crosshatching, rendered freehand with spray paint. Dondi's technique was sharper than ever—surprisingly, because he was not painting on a regular basis.

The Rempire crew, clockwise from left: Dondi, Zephyr, Lee, Stash, Futura, Daze (missing: Crash)
1992

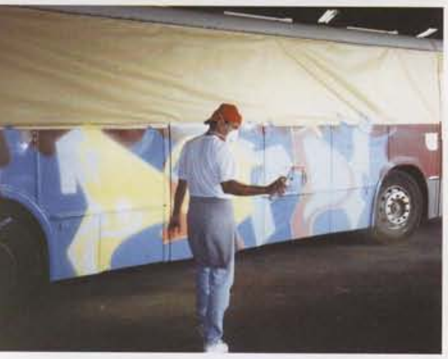
The response to the Rempire show was phenomenal. MTV covered the opening and hundreds of the artists' old friends and followers came out to see the work. At the opening on Greene Street, the cavernous gallery spilled over with attendees, and enormous crowds wound up partying in the street. After cars were unable to get through, the police were called in to assist with crowd control.

The frenzied reception at the Rempire show characterized the inherent contradictions of the writers' "aboveground" movement. While Americans were willing to open their hearts to the graffiti-based art, they remained less inclined to open their wallets. Over time, many of the top aerosol artists from the early 1980s explosion turned their talents toward graphic illustration, clothing design, and music production. A "hardcore unit"—notably CRASH, DAZE, QUIK, BLADE, and LEE—kept painting, relying on European support. Dondi summed up the situation in an October 1992 interview:

> The Europeans are very enthusiastic about the work—they've bought a lot of it. It's kind of sad that so much of our work is in Europe and that the

Americans haven't really backed it the same way as the Europeans—especially the Dutch. It's probably like anything else, the Europeans will pick it up first and the Americans will follow suit. I don't know. It's funny what motivates people to buy.

GRONINGER MUSEUM RETROSPECTIVE, OCTOBER 1992



Groningen
1992

The show entitled "Coming from the Subway–New York Graffiti Art" opened October 10, 1992, at the Groninger Museum in Holland. The show was a spectacular climax to Europe's unprecedented enthusiasm of the previous ten years. Every aspect of the show was beyond reproach. There was, however, some regret among the New York–based artists that such a reception could not take place on their home turf. Nonetheless, it was wonderful to see the work presented with such seriousness, as the artists, dealers, curators, and collectors reveled in the historic moment.

The opening week of the show took on the feeling of an international graffiti summit, as fellow writers, fans, and journalists from all over the world made the pilgrimage to the small city of Groningen. Lectures, slide shows, and various related presentations went on around the clock and the artists painted local buses for the show. The decorated buses traveled throughout the town, completing the transformation of Groningen into Graffitiland.

Dondi painted a beautiful bus. He executed it with the style and precision of an artist who had been painting large pieces every day, although it had actually been four years since Dondi painted his last subway car. When DAZE expressed this sentiment, Dondi replied, "It's like riding a bicycle. You never forget how to paint."

The Dutch had always presented the work of the writers with the utmost care and respect, and at the Groningen show they outdid themselves. Many of the artists were given their own wing or antechamber in the museum, and while the grandeur of the massive galleries was intimidating, the writers' paintings held their own. Dondi's work looked splendid and perfectly comfortable in the Groninger.

THE FIFTEEN-YEAR PORTFOLIO, 1995

In his later years, Dondi's primary focus became crafting exquisite, highly detailed illustrations. Over the course of seven or eight years, he developed a technique that combined blueprints and his delicate, precise pen and pencil work. It was not uncommon for Dondi to spend several months working on one of his flawless collage creations.

The original inspiration to work with blueprints came by accident when Dondi discovered a roll of blueprints in a garbage can in lower Manhattan. He began meticulously cutting them and pasting them into his work to accent his drawings. To his delight, he discovered later that the discarded blueprints were, ironically, for Metropolitan Transit Authority structures.

Toward the end of his life, Dondi kept his work extremely private and personal. He rejected commissions and created exclusively for his own gratification. However, he was generous with his drawings and surprised a number of his friends with unexpected gifts.

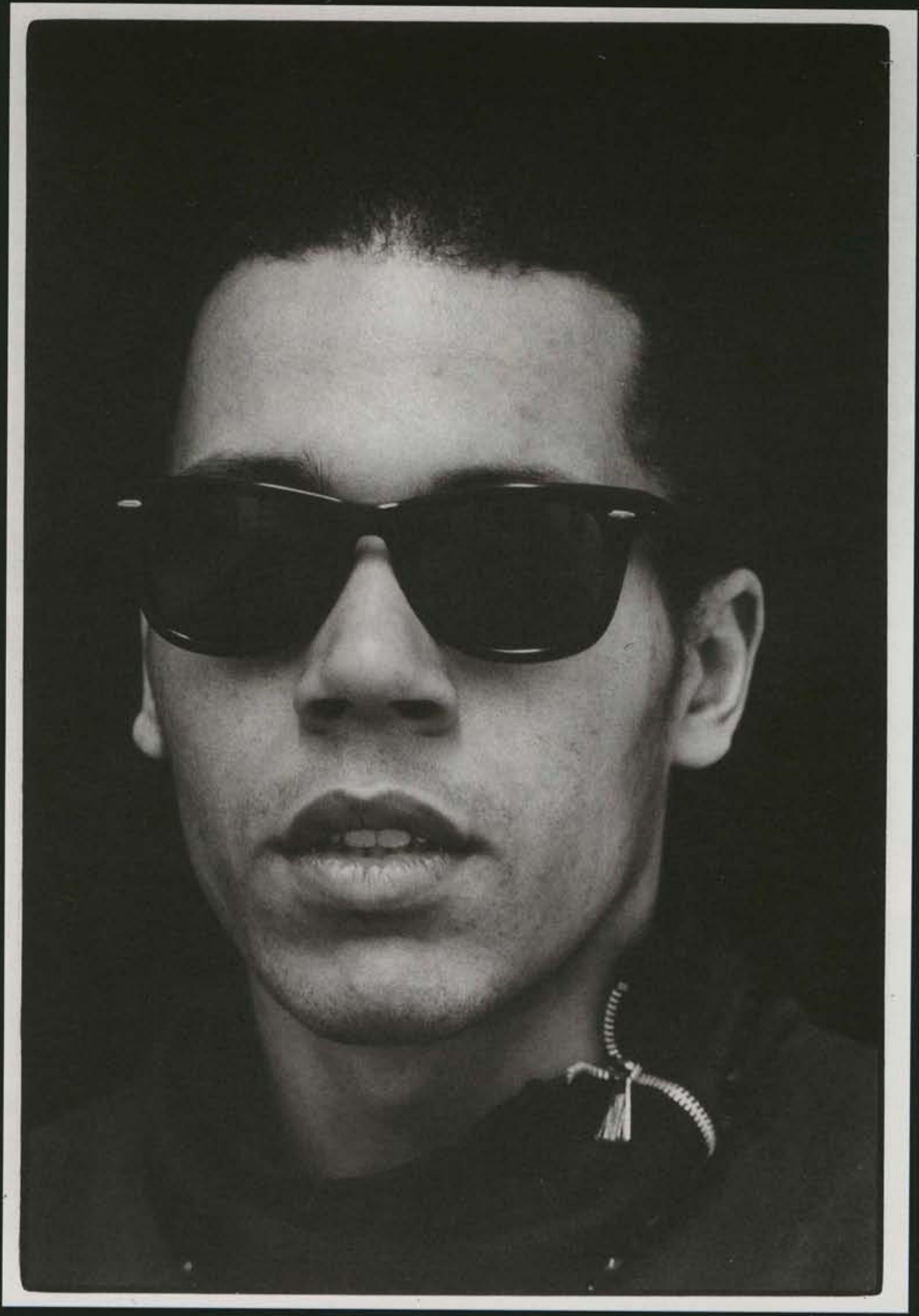
Dondi's final exhibit coincided with the release of a limited edition of handmade artist's prints. The print project (and corresponding exhibit and catalog) was produced by CRASH to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the writers' careers "aboveground." The lavish portfolio presented the works of the artists whom CRASH carefully handpicked for the project. The list included CRASH, DAZE, Dondi, Futura, LEE, PINK, and ZEPHYR.

Beginning in 1993, Dondi began to pursue a new interest—photography. He traveled the streets by foot and bicycle, shooting the "unnoticed" city. The people and places that others ignored intrigued him. Those relegated to the margins of society, particularly the homeless, were among his favorite subjects.

In conjunction with the release of the *Fifteen-Year Portfolio,* an East Village gallery, C World, mounted an exhibit of new works by the seven artists. Dondi surprised everyone when he contributed a number of his photographs to the show in lieu of paintings or drawings. But those who really knew Dondi couldn't be surprised. He was just being himself—making decisions independent of trends or expectations and always without regret. Soon thereafter Dondi was diagnosed with AIDS.

lichtreklame groep groningen
12°C
APOTHEEK SISSING
5
67

photo: © Martha Cooper



EPILOGUE

On October 2, 1998, Dondi White passed. He left this earth surrounded by the things that mattered most to him—his family, his friends, and his art.

Throughout his lifetime, Dondi White broke barriers. The art he created was valid and real. He continuously forced people to abandon their prejudices and take a closer look.

Dondi White refused to be labeled a criminal or a vandal because he was neither. He was an enormously gifted artist and an extraordinary individual.

From his train pieces done in the yards of East New York to his paintings in European museums, Dondi White stood by his convictions and forged his own path.

When news of his death reached the Internet, expressions of grief came pouring in from people all over the world. From places as far away as Czechoslovakia, Australia, and Japan came personal tales of how Dondi's work had inspired people. Those who didn't have the pleasure of knowing Dondi personally seemed as affected by his passing as those who did. In fact, many noted that they felt as though they had lost a close friend. As people shared personal stories of their connections to Dondi and his magnificent work, one clear fact emerged: Dondi White changed many people's lives.

People wrote about how they felt seeing "Buffalo Gals" or the photos in *Subway Art* for the first time. Some talked about experiencing an epiphany while looking at the photos of Dondi straddling the subway car, painting *Children of the Grave, Part 3.* Not only did Dondi's work inspire young people all over the planet to pick up pens and pencils and spray cans—he showed them how far their dreams could take them.

Adrock and Dondi
1995

RICKY POWELL

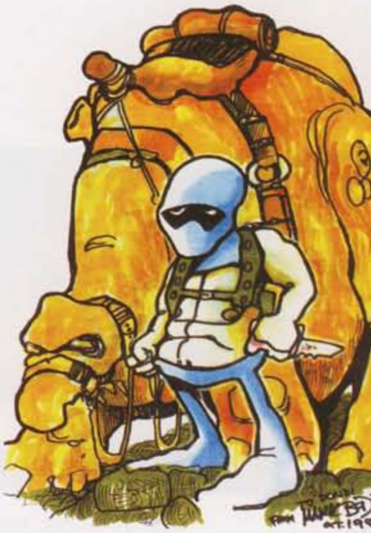
I remember the first time I saw Dondi was at his opening at the Fun Gallery in 1983. There was a huge gathering of people outside when a Dodge Charger pulled up. Rich Colicchio was driving. Dondi emerged from the car like a movie star at a Hollywood premiere. Right then and there his amazing graffiti legacy was transformed into a sort of celebrity carte blanche. It was beautiful. Dondi was handsome, with a really dope natural style about himself. I call it "b-boy sophisticato."

RICH COLICCHIO

The first time I saw Dondi's work was in the *Village Voice*'s Christmas issue, 1980. Dondi was one of six artists featured in an article by Richard Goldstein about graffiti. The centerfold featured a full-color layout of subway cars with top-to-bottom pieces. As I sat staring at the photos, I could not believe they were done with spray paint. The next time I saw Dondi's name was on an announcement for his solo show at the Fun Gallery in March of '82. As I entered the exhibit I was blown away by what I saw. Instead of "traditional" graffiti consisting of names and characters, I was surrounded by imagery of an unexpected nature. This is when I first saw *Psychological Suspense,* the toilet bowl painting, and my view of graffiti art was changed forever. Dondi and I became close friends. He was a staple at my gallery and his one-man shows opened the 1982 and 1983 seasons at 51X. Dondi's style was a defining factor in the entire graffiti movement.

MARK BODE

In 1982 I was living in Brooklyn and attending the School of Visual Arts. Dondi got a tip that my mother-in-law owned a bodega on State Street, and he left me a note. It said that he was a fellow artist and an admirer of Bode art and that he wanted to meet. I called him back and we met the same day. I figured I was about to meet another hard-core comic fan, but I was in for a nice surprise. When Dondi showed up I immediately noticed how humble and mellow he was. I liked his demeanor. He had a portfolio under his arm, and he showed me his work. I was impressed with his use of markers and his character designs. He had an amazing sureness of line, but his esoteric subject matter confused my literal sensibilities. I told him I thought we should jam on a comic strip together—something which, regrettably, never happened. We sat and drew in each other's sketchbooks. A couple hours passed and we just sat and drew. No music was playing, and we talked about art, but Dondi never said a word that day about graffiti or trains. Maybe he thought it would alienate me, because I didn't know too much about the movement at that time. Eventually, I did learn all about graffiti and how much Dondi exposed my family's art to new audiences.



Mark Bode drawing for Dondi
1986

CHARLIE AHEARN

Dondi, a creative titan in the yards, was also a gentle and supportive friend. I feel honored to have known and worked with him.

DAZE

I first became aware of Dondi while riding the No. 2 line to the Bronx. The year was 1978. I remember a silver and black top-to-bottom from his *Children of the Grave* series. Soon it seemed you couldn't get on the No. 2 or No. 5 line without seeing his work, or going to the writer's bench without hearing about Dondi's newest or latest. I eventually met Dondi through KEL. I was still developing as a writer, whereas Dondi had very much arrived. Many Sunday afternoons were spent hanging out in Dondi's basement, looking at photo albums, drawing outlines in black books, and talking shit. I now view those times as an essential part of my development, because Dondi taught me the importance of being a perfectionist. I remember one night in the yard with him when he spent the entire night working on a Dondism-KID 56 straight-letter, window-down backward piece. He made sure every line was straight, or in his own words, "arrows so sharp you could stab someone with them." Dondi was a meticulous painter. His sense of perfection was carried over to his drawings and works on paper. Dondi's explorations have inspired legions of young artists who continue his legacy to this day.

QUIK

I'll never forget Dondi's amazing show at the 51X Gallery. That evening in a packed, electrified room I saw the most unusual paintings one would ever expect from a graffiti painter. Brutally sad morbid skulls and alphabetical studies adorned the walls. The unforgettable "toilet bowl" piece was there that evening. Genius! This was a top-to-bottom subway-train bomber using his most precious tools to create a biting satire of the art world's three-ring circus mentality. Dondi was a thinking man's graf artist, way ahead of the pack.

FUTURA

Dondi had an enormous impact on the writing scene. He was the best at what he did—he was a perfectionist. Dondi never played the ego game—the "Writer God" thing. In the graffiti scene there's two types: the poseurs, and those that let their work do the talking. Dondi's work spoke loud and clear. Early on, as graffiti filtered into the so-called art world, Dondi was right there. But he was aware that this was a very different place. The King of New York recognized that he was a "toy" in this new environment—we were all toys. We didn't have any formal art backgrounds—we only had our energy and our vision to rely on. Dondi always stayed true to his roots. He predicted a lot of the things that transpired, like the selling-out of the culture. Maybe that's why he put his energy into has drawings and gave up the pressure of shows and openings. I think he was looking for the same level of perfection in his personal life that he achieved as a subway painter.

Zephyr, Dondi, and Futura
1980

DONTAY WILDER

I remember when I used to go to Dondi's crib in Brooklyn when he was living with his mother. I'd go over there with Kano. We would hang out and draw outlines in his basement where he used to do his paintings. That's where Dondi showed me how to do letters, and just seeing a legend do his thing was off the hook. Dondi was the true king of style . . . My nigga Mr. White. R.I.P., my brother. One love.

HAZE

Dondi was a true style master whose work will always stand the test of time. He could shine with simple letter styles, but was also a master at executing complicated wild-style letterforms and characters. Dondi was the leader of the last true golden age of subway graffiti, and his work will continue to have a profound effect on artists for generations to come.

WEST ONE, FAME CITY

I remember showing Dondi flicks of a piece we (Wane, Serge, Nesm, and I) had done at the Bronx Hall of Fame. He got excited about what he saw, and I mentioned to him that if he ever wanted to make a cameo appearance on one of our productions, we would be honored. I told him not to worry about paint or anything, just show up and rock a little something. He then told me that he would never paint publicly again, that the younger generation was so technically tight, and that his paint control was not up to speed. I assured him that anything he would lay down would be special because of WHO HE IS to graffiti. Anyway, I remember being

Dondi, Fab 5 Freddy, and Futura with the Clash
photo: Bob Gruen
1981

really taken aback by what he said, and the realization that we would be without any more public work from Dondi left me really sad. When I got news that he passed, one year later, this conversation rang in my head and took on a whole new meaning. I have always considered myself a student of Dondi's, twice removed, and he remains one of my greatest inspirations.

MARE

Over the many years that I knew him, his works were always distinctly Dondi. Even when he was using a different name on the train or painting on a canvas, it was always his unique style. He showed a controlled evolution and maturity with his work over the years. He was a standout in his generation, while many fell victim to exploitation. Dondi never changed his art to look like anything "popular." He never tried to create a flamboyant persona to cater to art dealers and the like. Dondi was a true pioneer.

DR. REVOLT

Back in '78, while hanging 'round the RTW headquarters (a.k.a. Bil-Roc's house) checking out piece books and graf flicks, Bil-Roc pulled out a stack of snapshots of various writers and artists. Urban teens mugging for the camera on elevated subway platforms. Goofing off, tagging up, just having fun. Acting carefree, like they're gonna live forever. The usual shit: afros, bell-bottoms, Ike jackets, Pro-Keds, and those T-shirts with the buttons in the front. Among the flicks was a photo of Dondi C.I.A. on a rooftop. We had yet to meet, but I was familiar with his work on the Twos, the Fives, and the BMT's. It was good. Real good. In the photo his stance was proud, his pose solo. Sporting double-knit slacks and fresh kicks. He was styling. Behind him, a grand vista of the Brooklyn landscape with the Manhattan skyline looming prophetically beyond . . .

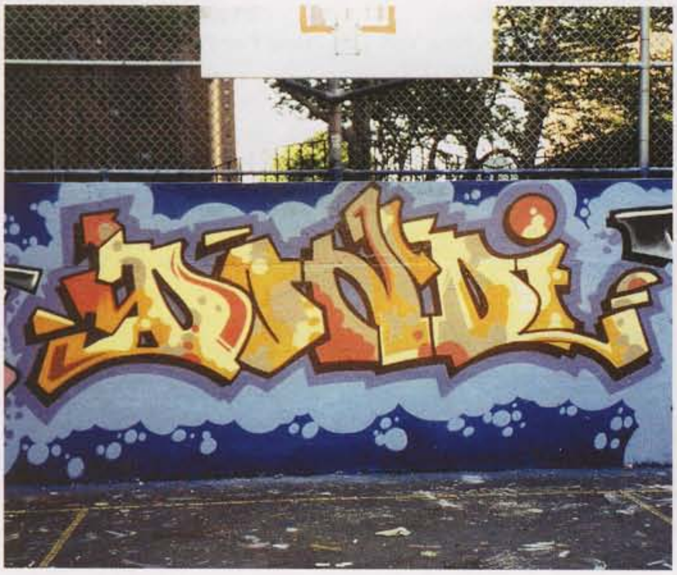
KEO

I painted a "third rail" piece in the Hall of Fame on 106th Street and Park Avenue on Memorial Day 2000. When I heard that Doc and Zephyr weren't going to be able to make it, I felt that Dondi needed to be represented, although I wasn't sure I was qualified to do him justice. But then again, who really is? Dondi was the best. I chose one of Dondi's lesser known aliases. I remember as I was painting, James TOP was walking around the schoolyard telling dudes that if anyone went over this piece, there was gonna be trouble. I felt like I was doing something that was larger than me, something more important than just writing my name on the wall. Dondi was a major influence. It was an honor to try and give something back. It amazed me how people came by while I was painting to give Dondi love. It wasn't about me, it was about the enormous impact Dondi's life and work had on the graffiti community as a whole.

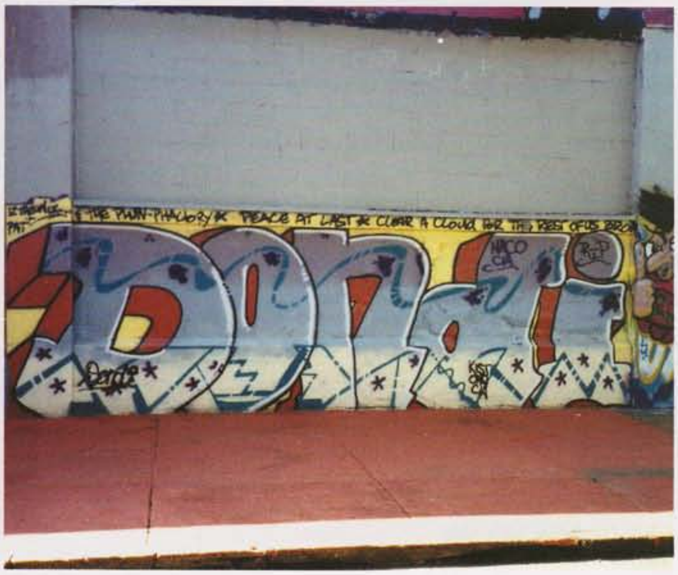
MARTHA COOPER

By instructing me on the intricacies of subway graffiti, Dondi changed the course of my life. His patient tutoring on the subject of spray painting led me to quit a full time job as a staff newspaper photographer in order to have enough time to wait for and photograph freshly painted trains. Our intensive collaboration led to the publication, with Henry Chalfant, of *Subway Art*, and thus introduced graffiti to much of the world.

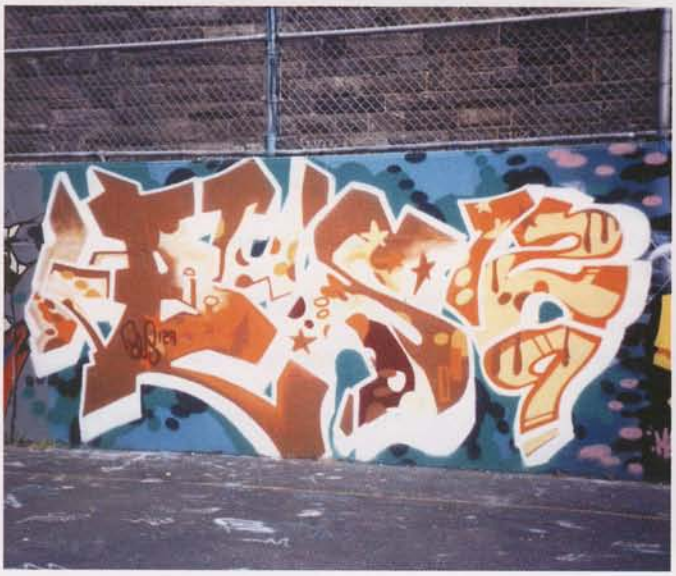
My subsequent life has been infinitely more interesting than it would have been without meeting Dondi and I would like to think that his life was similarly enriched. Neither of us could have predicted twenty years ago that our joint efforts would have such far reaching, long lasting effects. I'm so sad that Dondi isn't around to celebrate the publication of his book, a wonderful testament to his life and art.



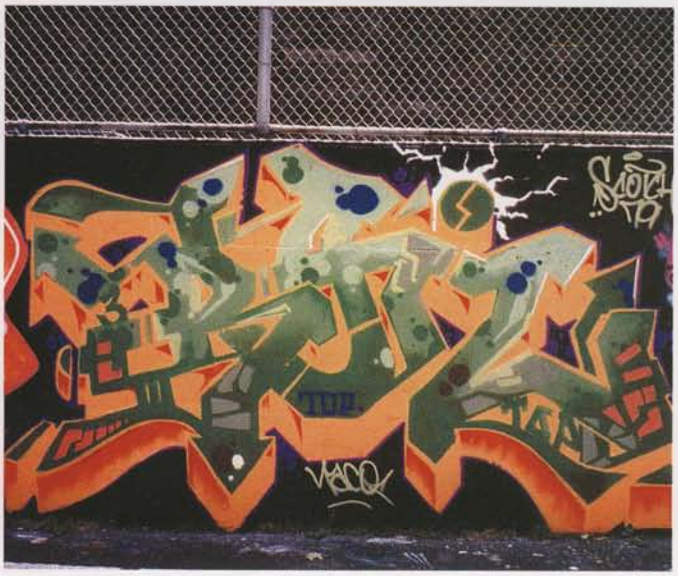
Dondi by Zephyr
1999



Dondi by Iz the Wiz
1998



Bus 129 by Doc
1999



3rd Rail by Keo
2000

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

1982
Fun Gallery, New York City
1982
51X Gallery, New York City, "The Ugly Man"
1983
Yaki Kornblit Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Fun Gallery, New York City
Art in Progress, Düsseldorf, Germany
51X Gallery, New York City, "Style Continuation"
1984
Yaki Kornblit Gallery, Amsterdam, the Netherlands
1987
56 Bleeker Gallery, New York City, "Matter of Facts"

GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

1980
Club 57, New York City
1981
Mudd Club, New York City
P.S. 1, New York City, "New York/New Wave"
Mudd Club, New York City, "Beyond Words"
The Kitchen, New York City
1982
Porter Sesnon Gallery, Santa Cruz, California, "Burners"
51X Gallery, New York City
Nature Morte Gallery, New York City
1983
121 Art Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
Monique Knowlton Gallery, New York City, "Intoxication"
Gallery Piranesi, Zurich, Switzerland
Seibu Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
1984
Artist Space, New York City
Gallery Thomas, Munich, Germany
Cologne Art Fair, Cologne, Germany
Zurich Art Fair, Zurich, Switzerland
Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy, "Arte di Frontiera"
1985
Ronald Feldman, New York City
Gallozzi Laplaca Gallery, New York City
1987
Stax Gallery, New York City, "Remembrances"
Gallery Thomas, Munich, Germany
1988
Procter Art Center, New York City, "Real Paint"
1989
Nassauischer Kunstverein, Weisbaden, Germany
Heidelberger Kunstverein, Heidelberg, Germany
Helmond Museum, Helmond, the Netherlands
Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany
1992
Rempire, New York City, "Legacy"
Industry, Detroit, Michigan, "Education"
1993
Space Time Light Gallery, New York City
1995
C World, New York City, "Fifteen Years Aboveground"

MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS:

1983
Museum Boymans-van Bueningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, "Graffiti"
1984
Groninger Museum, Groningen, the Netherlands, "Graffiti"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, "The Becht Collection"
Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark, "New York Graffiti"
Rijk Museum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, the Netherlands
1985
Stedelijk Museum, Helmond, the Netherlands, "New York Graffiti"
1986
Leopold-Hoesch Museum, Duren, Germany, "New York Graffiti"
1986
Helmond Museum, Helmond, the Netherlands
1989
Heidelberger Kunstverein, Heidelberg, Germany
1991
Museé National des Monuments Français, Paris, France
1992
Groninger Museum, Groningen, the Netherlands, "New York GraffitiArt"
1996
Roermond Museum, Roermond, the Netherlands
1998
Museum der Stadt Ratingen, Ratingen, Germany

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Michael White:

To my children, Michelle, Michael, and Andriana. To the memory of Dad and Mom, Robert, Gilbert and Carol, and Donald.

Special thanks to Judith Regan for having the courage to publish this, to Karamel 180 for sharing secrets, and to Joan, Karen, Tamika, Chris, Raul, James, Blake, and Lenny. To Sal Corso and Edlin at the Fourteenth Street Bike Shop. To Venus, for caring. To Andy, your undying friendship and love for my brother were the energy behind this project. Thanks to Peter Girardi and Chris Capuozzo at Funny Garbage.

To Dana, our editor—your determination kept this project on track. There are the Five Sons of Lucia, and now one honorary daughter.

Andrew "Zephyr" Witten:

I'd like to thank everyone who dedicated time, energy, material, and resources to this project. I am particularly grateful to Debbie for her support, and Dana and Peter for their dedication, commitment, and understanding. Special thanks to Jon Baer, Ruza Blue, Chris Capuzzo, Henry Chalfant, Rich Colicchio, Martha Cooper, Patty Donnelly, Eric and Luke Felisbret, Lin Felton, Shauna Figueroa, Tom Hurley, Carlo McCormick, Ivor Miller, Henk Pijnenburg, Edlin Pitts, Ricky Powell, James TOP, Karen Tuijnman, Chris Vanager, Anne Weaver, Al White, Jaime Wolf, and my mother, Barbara Witten. Most of all, I must thank Dondi . . . you're the man.

PHOTO CREDITS

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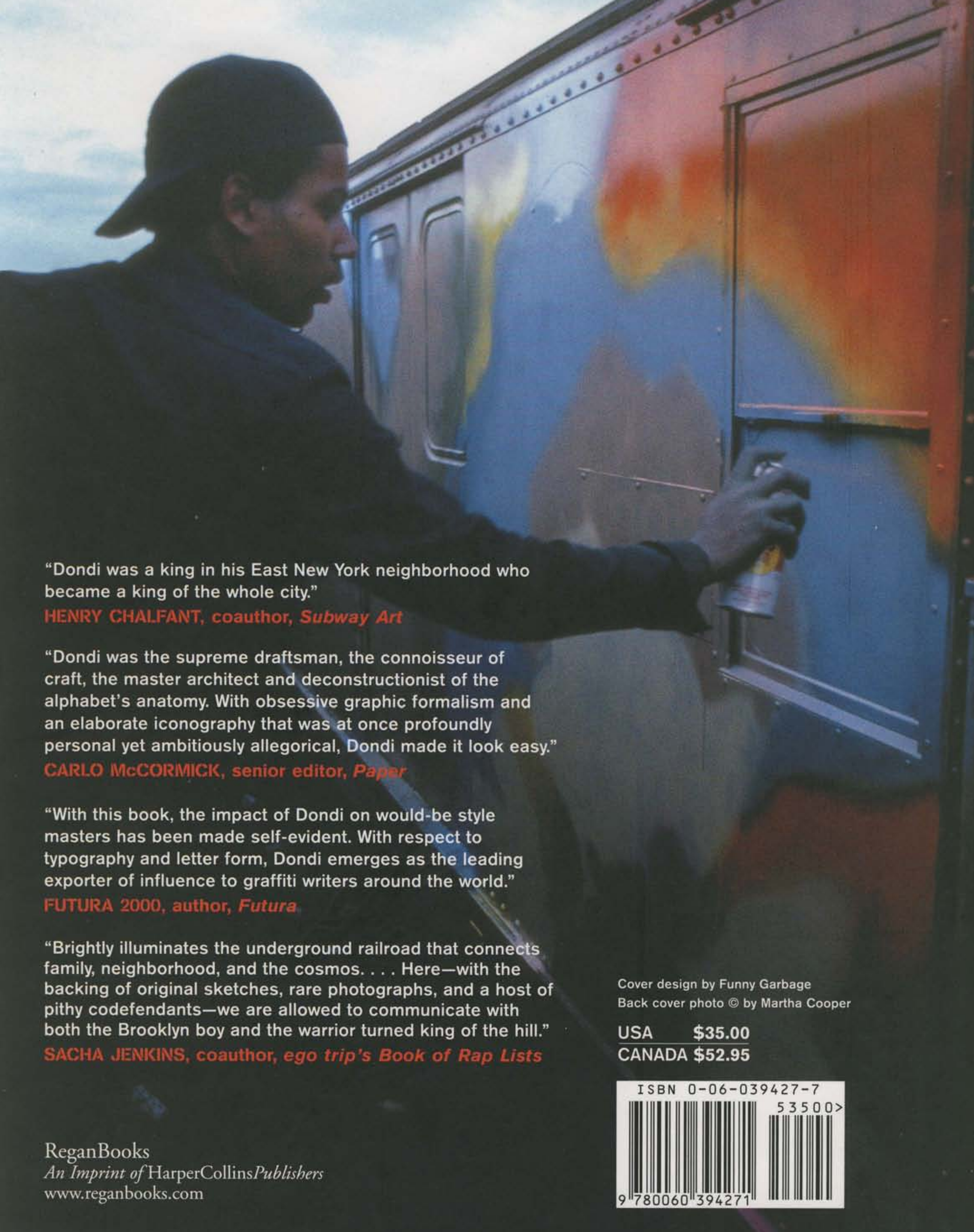

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